**Climbing Mt Shasta with My Father & The Prostate Awareness Foundation**

 **Quincy Zlotnick**

I signed two names. I signed two names not in forgery or subterfuge or to practice penmanship. No, I signed two names because I climbed for two people. My father and I had planned to summit Mt Shasta together. We never foresaw one of us being forced to turn back, but here I stood alone. And, though it might never be read, if my name were to grace the little black logbook at the top of that very big mountain, then his belonged right beside it.

My whole family, in fact, had planned to climb Mt Shasta. Making our attempt at the 14,000’+ peak with the Prostate Awareness Foundation, an organization my father had helped run since shortly after his cancer diagnosis almost twenty years earlier, we’d raised money, trained, and even set off together, simply not considering that one or more of us might not complete it. Our packs were even equipped together, with entirely uneven shares of food, water and gear that could only form complete climbing kits through cooperation. Clearly, we had no intention of being separated. However, the mountain had other plans for us, and after five hours of trudging up a seemingly vertical glacier, through darkness, in vicious cold and wind, my parents decided to head back. Although my father had ten years earlier, easily ascended Africa’s 19,000’+ Mt Kilimanjaro, his advancing age and successive cancer treatments had robbed his body of much of it’s strength. He neither saw nor had any reason to see any shame in giving up the dream of summiting. At fifteen years old and fresh off my high school basketball team, however, I saw little reason to be deterred.

At this point, though, the climb became a wholly different matter for me. In all my previous hikes, rides and other trips, my parents had either gone before or with me, depending on my age at the time. My childhood challenges had always found me with my father at my side, either leading me, advising me, or encouraging me to revel in and aspire to his own accomplishments. This time, however, he would have to live through me. My father might never be able to see the top of Mt Shasta – probably would never get the chance to make another attempt – but I could see it for him. And when we returned, I could help his fight, help him go on where once he had always helped me, and help my family rise above a disease that attacked one but weighed on all three of it’s members. So I pushed through, fighting altitude sickness and the greatest exhaustion I have felt before or since. I certainly could not say the last few hours of that climb were at all akin to “fun”, or, for that matter, anything other than absolute misery. If only for myself, I probably would not have finished. On this climb, however, I carried my father with me, and I was not going to let him miss the summit. So after eleven of the toughest hours of my life, I peered out at the world’s expanse over two miles below, and I signed two names.

*Quincy successfully summited Mt Shasta in 2012 at 15 years old with the Cancer Climb for Prostate Awareness Expedition. He wrote the above essay for the National Merit Finalist requirement.*