

# AT THE TOP OF MOUNT EVEREST

*Sebastian, the son of Claudette and Christian Sasseville from Saint-Patrice de Beaurivage, realized his dream, last May, of climbing the highest summit on earth, Mount Everest, in spite of a formidable obstacle, a serious illness diagnosed a few years ago. Having realized this feat, he is now in demand across the country to give conferences, thus sharing his experience. Through his message of hope given on Sunday, September 14 at Spiri-Maria, during the triduum of prayer in honor of the Triumph of the Cross, Sebastian showed us that true freedom is found in the surpassing of ourselves.*

My name is Sebastian Sasseville, and I have been living with type 1 diabetes for more than six years, an illness that obliges me to test my blood more than ten times a day and wear an insulin pump attached to my stomach 24 hours a day in order to stay alive.



Sebastian Sasseville

One day, an elderly man described his inner battles in this way: "Inside of me, in my mind, I always have the impression of having two dogs: a good dog and a bad dog, and the dogs always seem to want to fight." When the man was asked which dog usually won the battle, he replied: "The one I feed the most."

When I was diagnosed with having type 1 diabetes, I received a bad dog. And I am with you today, not to vaunt a sporting feat, but really to tell you the story of my last few years, years during which I decided to choose the good dog as often as possible.

## A MESSAGE OF HOPE

For me, the good dog was Mount Everest, but especially, the desire to send a message, a message of hope to those living with type 1 diabetes, a condition which, in 50% of the cases, leads the sick person to depression. Worse still, the illness strikes almost always only young people who often chose to completely ignore the illness. The consequences are catastrophic, and sometimes fatal.

## THE BEGINNING: ACCEPTANCE

Of course, the message rings loud and clear. Everywhere, I tell people that diabetes is not a limitation. To all those who are willing to hear it, I repeat that, in spite of the illness, there is no limit to what one can accomplish, be this in the area of sports, the arts or academically, that one can live a full and active life, a wonderful and long life with diabetes, and that, with a little effort, one can accomplish great things, even things which people in perfect health would not dare attempt.

But all of that is a battle, represents effort and determination. But that is not where it all begins. It all begins with the acceptance of the illness. That is the first

by Sebastian SASSEVILLE

step to be taken, and nothing can be accomplished until there is acceptance.

## THE END OF AN EXPEDITION?...

A few years ago, during a training session in Tibet, our team had as a mission to climb the sixth highest mountain in the world. My experience on that mountain was absolutely extraordinary. Absolutely extraordinary because nothing worked out as it should have. Avalanches, sickness, injuries, rock slides, everything was against us, to the point where, a few weeks after the beginning of the expedition, all the other members of the team decided to abandon the project.

Against the orders of the leader of the expedition, I refused to leave the mountain. The next day, as I attempted to find a means of reaching the summit, my disappointment was slowly transformed into frustration and then anger. At about supper time, I was waiting for one final telephone call on the satellite phone, a call which would be the last word: an authorization to climb or the announcement of the withdrawal of the entire support team, which would mark the end of my expedition. My anger increased minute by minute.

For a moment, I began to pay attention to the Nepalese people who were around me and were working for us. Poor and dirty but smiling, they were playing cards and there were many peals of laughter. They, for whom the survival of their families depended on the salary they would earn during the expedition, seemed to have accepted much more quickly than I, what was out of their control. For my part, I was in Nepal for training and, after that perhaps, to have fun. At that moment, I realized that I myself was not doing what I preached. Ashamed but enlightened, I understood that it was time to accept what nature was meting out. In a few moments, I was at peace with the mountain, and I decided that it was time to pack my bags. Nature, like a mother, had just taught me a great lesson. Five minutes later, I received the long-awaited telephone call and the authorization to continue climbing the next day. The mountain, like a guide, had assured itself that I was ready before opening up.

I never reached the summit of that mountain, for, a few days later, I was forced to turn back because of a storm. But as a result of the lesson learned, not to have reached the summit became nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

## THE BASE CAMP OF MOUNT EVEREST: AN ARRIVAL POINT

The base camp of Mount Everest, a fascinating place. Are we at an arrival point or a departure point? Theoretically, at a departure point. However, a de-

parture point that nonetheless required ten days of march at high altitudes to reach it, a colossal task that discouraged more than one person. A third of the marchers would have to abandon the expedition even before having reached base camp. Philosophically, it was an arrival point and that is the way I decided to consider the base camp.

The recent Olympic games are an excellent example of this. Does one really become a champion on the day of the race? Does one really become a champion upon arriving at the summit of Mount Everest? Absolutely not. One becomes a champion during training. For four years, the athletes train without respite, getting up early and making enormous sacrifices, and that is when they become champions. On the day of the race, they are on automatic pilot. They repeat one last time what they have done thousands of times. After five years of preparation, the Mount Everest base camp was an arrival point, so that even before beginning the perilous ascent, my dream had been fulfilled.

## THE KHUMBU ICE SLIDE: AN OBSTACLE OF BREATHTAKING BEAUTY BUT TERRIFYING

As we left the base camp, we came up against the first obstacle: the Khumbu ice slide separating us from camp no.1, an obstacle that was both of a breathtaking beauty and terrifying. To cross the ice slide, we would sometimes need more than ten hours. The climb towards the summit would be done in several thrusts, and several times, we returned to the base camp often to regain our strength. I remem-



The Khumbu ice slide

ber sometimes having had difficulty sleeping at the base camp because of the noise caused by the avalanches on the ice slide, while still having to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning the next day for a full day. There was nothing there to motivate me to get out of my sleeping bag especially since the outside temperature hovered around the minus fifteen degree mark and that the tent was pitched directly on ice. For a month and a half, we would go back and forth between the base camp and camp no. 3, a suffering that, once again, became a learning experience. It was the ideal opportunity to learn the great difference there is between what one wants

to do and what must be done in order to achieve one's goals.

### THE CREVASSES: AN OBSTACLE THAT COST MANY LIVES

The crevasses, an obstacle we came across many times on the Everest, an obstacle that cost many lives. The same is true of sickness; it is an obstacle. There are numerous similarities between the two, and in fact, only one difference differentiates them: one obstacle was chosen, the other, not. I chose Mount Everest. Over the years, Mount Everest, the greatest obstacle there was, was transformed into a school, a guide. In order to prepare myself for it, I travelled all over the world. Extraordinary people and cultures crossed my path. And, ironically, in spite of my illness, I am in a physical shape that is very enviable. The obstacle has been changed into a gift.



The crevasses, an obstacle we came across many times on the Everest.

was, was transformed into a school, a guide. In order to prepare myself for it, I travelled all over the world. Extraordinary people and cultures crossed my path. And, ironically, in spite of my illness, I am in a physical shape that is very enviable. The obstacle has been changed into a gift.

### THE ILLNESS ACCEPTED: A GIFT

Thanks to Mount Everest, I understood that all the obstacles, even those we have not chosen, could be changed into gifts. Today, more than six years after my diagnosis, I have accepted my illness, and I have made of it a gift, a gift that I would never want to return. The illness is a part of my life and has given it meaning. I use it every day to grow and to help others grow. The illness, the obstacle, has become an indispensable tool in my progression or journey.

After a month and a half of climbing, once we had reached the third camp, the illness began to take up a great deal of time and energy. It slowed me down considerably. After having spent

several years repeating that the illness was not a limitation, for the first time it was a limitation. And yet, that had been obvious since the very beginning. How could a serious chronic illness have been an advantage? However, although I was much slower than the rest of the team, I continued.

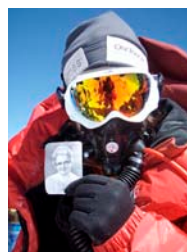
It took me six hours more than the rest of the team to reach camp no. 4. It is at such a high altitude that it is impossible to survive there for more than a few days, which is the reason why the area was nicknamed the death zone. When I arrived, I had a difficult discussion with the leader of the expedition. It was obvious that at that speed, it would be impossible for me to reach the summit. No one in the team thought that I had any chance of achieving my goal.

The next day, after a long day spent simply trying to survive, we left for the summit at about 8 p.m., in the hope of reaching the summit by the next morning.

At about 1:00 a.m., we reached a spot called the balcony. At that point, all the other members of the team had had to abandon the expedition. I was the only one who carried on, whereas 24 hours earlier, no one had any confidence in me.

The next morning, after a long night of effort, we had finally reached the south summit. And, an hour later, we reached the summit of Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world.

Sebastian, at the top of Mount Everest, holding a photo of Marie-Paule given to him by his father, before his departure on this expedition.



Of course, I was overcome by sentiments of joy and accomplishment which are difficult to express. I was in heaven.

Having come back down to earth, it is not the summit that I remember the most. This brings me to a final reflection, one last story.

### NEVER FORGET WHAT IS ESSENTIAL... A CHAMPION IN THE SILENCE OF TRAINING

One day, an inventor discovered the art of building a fire. The inventor, a man of great wisdom, brought his knowledge to a distant tribe. Captivated by the novelty, the thought never occurred to the tribe to thank the inventor and he quietly left. Given his greatness of soul, he did not aspire to being venerated, seeking simply the satisfaction of knowing that someone would benefit from his knowledge.

The next tribe was just as fascinated by his invention. But the tribe's leaders, jealous of the stranger's ascendancy over the people, had him assassinated. So that people would not become suspicious, a statue in his image was built, a book was written to recall the man's goodness and a liturgy was composed to keep his memory alive. A great many tasks were created in order to ensure that the inventor's doctrines were obeyed, and those who did not obey his words were punished. Absorbed by all those tasks and rituals, the people of the tribe forgot the art of building a fire.

Hundreds and hundreds of sacrifices, trials and experiences led me to Mount Everest; dozens of friendships developed; five wonderful years of preparation spent in the shadows, five years spent cultivating the art of building a fire, of which I will keep the greatest and best memory, much more than the twenty short minutes spent on the summit, regardless of how glorious they may be.

And that is the story I came to share with you today. The story of a life spent accepting obstacles, using them, deciding to feed the good dog. The story of a life spent becoming a champion in the silence of training rather than in the race. And I hope that my story will serve to inspire the young and not so young, whether or not they are ill.

Sebastian Sasseville  
September 14, 2008

## It All Began on a Mountain

Information given by Christian Sasseville regarding Sebastian's birth.

May 1979: Claudette was five months pregnant with our first child, and we were participating in our second pilgrimage with the Army of Mary, the one in honor of the Pope during which we would go to Spain and Italy. The pilgrimage unfolded according to the scheduled itinerary, but we were in for a "surprise". We would be going to Garabandal, a small village in the Spanish Pyrenees where the Virgin Mary appeared between 1961 and 1965, and during which events of a worldwide import were announced.

We were happy to go to Garabandal, which we had heard about. The village

is not located at a high altitude, but the road leading to it, winding and following the side of the mountain, made us discover a part of Spain isolated from the rest of the world and as though "lost in the mountain".

Having arrived at Garabandal, the pilgrims went, especially, to "the pines", there where the Virgin appeared often. Of course, the pilgrims were deeply recollected because we had the feeling, at that solemn moment, of being in communion with Heaven and at the same time of living historical moments because of the highly prophetic nature of the apparitions at Garabandal. Unforgettable memories!

Deeply touched by our passage at

Garabandal, I clearly remember that, in the bus on our way down from the mountain, Claudette and I had decided to name our first child Sebastian, if it was a boy, for the complete name of the village was San Sebastian de Garabandal, that is to say, Saint Sebastian of Garabandal. There you have the origin of the name given to Sebastian, our eldest.

Several times in the last years, I have often asked myself where Sebastian could have acquired this liking for high mountains, this very special liking and which has caused us such anxiety! Although several levels of explanations and understanding are perhaps possible, it would really seem that his "stay" at Garabandal in his mother's womb marked his destiny.

Christian Sasseville  
September 21, 2008