



BECAUSE IT'S THERE

Mike King took the trip to Nepal with his wife, Monica Fernandi.



If you've ever come home after a long day walking your route and felt like you just trekked through the mountainous Asian country of Nepal, ask **Mike King** what that really feels like.

King, a member of Northern Virginia Branch 3520, put his letter carrier legs to the test with a 43-mile round-trip hike to the Mt. Everest Base Camp. That's 43 miles of rugged terrain, starting at an altitude of 9,000 feet and ascending to base camp at 17,600 feet—higher than California's Mt. Whitney, the tallest peak in the contiguous United States.

King took the 16-day trip—10 days of hiking and six days of travel to and from the trail—with his wife, Monica Fernandi, and their friend Marianne Clyde last October. The trio went halfway around the world for more than a rugged vacation—they also raised funds for a good cause. They were inspired by adventurer-athlete Sara Hastreiter, who led their trip. Hastreiter is on a quest to become the first woman to sail the seven seas and climb the highest peaks on each of the seven continents, a quest she has nearly completed. In the process, Hastreiter has teamed with charity group World Hope International to focus on

bringing clean drinking water to every part of the world. To raise money for the group, she leads hikers on her training hikes who gather donations for World Hope International from sponsors.

When Clyde suggested the charity trip to Nepal, "it clicked on a light bulb in my head," King said. "I've always been an avid adventurer, and I've always loved the thought of possibly visiting that area."

Base camp is a challenging, but attainable goal for casual climbers like King. Going higher, toward the summit of Everest, requires months of high-altitude training, advanced climbing experience and many thousands of dollars for travel equipment, supplies, permits and hiring porters. King and his wife live near Shenandoah National Park in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. While the park didn't have much to offer for altitude training—the highest point in the Shenandoah is 4,050 feet—it provided good terrain for regular hikes for the couple to prepare for the trek.

"We took a hiking circuit book," he said, "and we started knocking them out every weekend."

King and the other two climbers raised \$5,000 each in donations to

Right: A suspension bridge near the Everest base camp
Below: King with his hiking group at base camp.



support World Hope International's clean water efforts. He heard many words of encouragement from his customers and fellow postal employees in Warrenton, VA, where he delivers the mail, as news of his trip spread in local newspapers. "I had a lot of support from folks on the route who read about it."

Base camp is the first stop for climbers seeking to reach the summit of Mt. Everest at 29,029 feet. There are actually two Everest base camps, one in Nepal on the mountain's southern side and one on the northern side, in Tibet. King's group hiked to the base camp in Nepal. Most climbers headed for the summit of Everest spend weeks at a base camp, making short climbs to acclimate their bodies to the lack of oxygen that comes with high altitudes.

At 17,600 feet, the low air pressure means that each breath provides only about half the oxygen to the lungs as it does at sea level. That made 43 miles feel like many more.

"I thought it was going to be a piece of cake—we're just walking up a hill," King said. But the thin air took a heavy toll on his body's ability to move. "To climb up four steps, you'd have to pause and wait," he said. "Just going up four steps, you're breathing heavily, and you say, 'Really?'"

Watching how effortlessly Hastreiter led them on the 10-day hike—a training hike for her summit attempt—gave him great respect for her abilities and her quest to reach the summit, King said. "It was amazing what it took just for us to get to base camp," he said.

Fortunately, two local porters who already were acclimated to the altitude carried most of the group's gear.

The risk of altitude sickness, which at that level can cause serious medical problems and sometimes even death, hung over the adventurers' heads, but no one on the trip experienced health problems, nor did any climber suffer serious injury due to a stumble or fall. They also avoided the risks of food poisoning, bumpy road trips and hazardous airplane flights in the mountainous area to reach the starting point of the hike. The climbers even experienced the lack of safe drinking water first-hand—they had to buy bottled water that had been boiled to make it safe to drink.

The group reached base camp on

Oct. 9, safe and sound. Still, hiking at high altitude took its toll, especially since the starting point was already at a high elevation. Climbing any mountain requires more effort on the way up and will take longer than coming back down, but the effort needed each way was magnified dramatically by the thin air, King said. "The wild part is that it took seven days to go up, three days to come down because of the altitude," King said.

Would he do it again?

"Guaranteed," King said. "For me, the experience was the whole thing. And the scenery was everything I had read about and imagined." **PR**

