

The Queen of Everest Trains While Working at Whole Foods

Lhakpa Sherpa has climbed Mount Everest 10 times, the most ascents ever by a woman. She has no plans of slowing down.

By Bhadra Sharma and Adam Skolnick

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When Lhakpa Sherpa trudged into Everest base camp alongside her 15-year-old daughter, Shiny Dijmarescu, last April, it felt like a homecoming.

She was back in Nepal after four long years, hoping to take in the view from the roof of the world for the 10th time. If successful, Lhakpa would break her own record for most Everest ascents ever by a woman.

Unlike the routines of most climbers, who drop into specialized training for months or even years, Lhakpa's training regimen took place at a Whole Foods in West Hartford, Conn., where she carried large stacks of boxed fruits and vegetables. Occasionally, she hiked to the top of the 6,288-foot Mount Washington, a meager stand-in for the highest mountain on earth.

When she returned to Nepal last spring, Everest looked different. There was noticeably less snow and ice, and what was left felt less stable. The ropes and ladders that a team of Sherpa guides lashed across the chasms in the notorious Khumbu icefall had to be fixed daily rather than the usual once a week. More garbage was visible than in years past. There were dead bodies, too, a sight that is as devastating as it is common these days when the weather changes. Now, as a mother in her mid-to-late 40s — she doesn't have a birth certificate and doesn't know her exact birthday — she felt every ounce of the risk.

The first time Lhakpa touched Himalayan blue ice, she was barefoot. One of 11 children born to a shepherd and homemaker in the village of Makalu, Nepal, she grew up on the slopes of Mount Makalu, the world's fifth-highest peak at 27,825 feet. Her family couldn't afford shoes for every child, and only her brothers were sent to school. "We had no television and no phone. I used to spend my day watching sheep and birds," she said. "I could see Mount Everest from my village."



Lhakpa, center, arriving in Kathmandu, Nepal, in May after summiting Mount Everest for the 10th time. Niranjan Shrestha/Associated Press

Stuck at home, she'd escape the withering glare of her disapproving mother by venturing into those mountains barefoot and alone. When she returned, her worried mother often warned her that if by some miracle she weren't eaten by a snow leopard, nobody would ever wish to marry her.

Her father saw her strength. One spring, he sent her up above Makalu's base camp to collect the spring lambs and yak calves before snow leopards found them. There she bumped into Sherpa men in technical clothing with ropes and ice axes, preparing to climb the mountain. She vowed to become one of them, even though Sherpa women were not offered those jobs.

"I promised myself that I would reach the top of Everest one day," she said.

She began looking for a job as a porter at age 15. Babu Chhiri Sherpa, a legendary guide who in 1999 spent a record 21 hours on the summit of Mount Everest without supplemental oxygen, took a chance on her once she turned 17.

She started as a porter, carrying heavy loads up steep mountains, and was promoted to a kitchen boy — a title that illustrates Lhakpa's unusual career path — within two years. She'd hike and climb all day, then set up the kitchen tent and peel onions and garlic for hours on end before serving guides and their clients. She was paid roughly \$50 a month.

In 2000, not quite 10 years since she'd become a porter, Lhakpa approached the future Deputy Prime Minister Sujata Koirala, then best known as Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's daughter, with a pitch to fund the first Nepali women-only Everest expedition. The seven-woman team, known as the Daughters of Everest, began their journey in May that year.

On the day the team was set to reach the summit, six of them succumbed to altitude sickness. Lhakpa went on to become the second Nepali woman to reach the summit, and the first to make it back to base camp safely. (In 1993, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa became the first to summit the mountain, but she died on her descent.)

The very next year, Lhakpa summited Everest again, less than three weeks after her mentor, Babu Chhiri, slipped into a crevasse around the second camp and died. It was not the last time she would lose friends on the mountain.

She was there in 2014 when a block of ice the size of a building sheared off Everest's western slope and an ice avalanche wiped out a Sherpa team in the Khumbu icefall. Sixteen died. She was resting at the first camp when a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck on April 25, 2015, triggering several avalanches. The deadliest one swept through base camp. It's estimated that 22 people lost their lives on Everest that day. Half were Nepali.



Lhakpa was the second Nepali woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest, and the first to make it back to base camp safely. Prakash Mathema/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“I’ve lost many of my heroes, many of my best friends,” she said.

Her climbing trajectory took a turn when she moved to Connecticut after marrying the Romanian climber George Dijmarescu in 2002. Together, they ran a roofing and painting business. Lhakpa was most comfortable doing the hard work. She’d climb ladders with shingles piled on one shoulder, tear apart old roofs and piece together new ones. But Dijmarescu, who died in 2020, became violent after her first daughter, Sunny, was born, she said. One night in 2012, he beat her so badly that she was taken to the emergency room, she said. With the help of a hospital social worker, she and her two girls fled to a local shelter where they stayed for eight months.

Desperate for work, she took a job cleaning houses and eventually moved the family into a small apartment. Occasionally clients heard her last name and asked if she had relatives who climbed the big mountains. Her cousin and brother had both followed her into the business and were now leading their own expedition agencies, so she’d nod politely and keep her accomplishments to herself.

Eventually, she started washing dishes in the commercial kitchen of a Whole Foods branch. Co-workers gradually learned of her story because she would sometimes leave town to guide foreigners up Mount Everest. The money she earned went toward her daughters’ college savings.



“I want to teach them climbing skills and show them that all girls can climb mountains,” Lhakpa said. Stan Godlewski for The New York Times

In 2022, she quit her supermarket job to try her 10th summit, a hallowed number in Everest mountaineering akin to 500 home runs or 3,000 hits in baseball. Thirty-four men had achieved it. Twenty-six of them were Nepali of Sherpa descent, including Babu Chhiri, and Lhakpa wanted to shatter one more Himalayan glass ceiling.

As usual, she had no sponsors. Lack of sponsorship deals is not a new issue in women's climbing, and if she were going to successfully summit the mountain, she would need to do so with her own funding.

When a three-day weather window opened in May, it seemed that all of base camp had mobilized for a summit push. "Everybody has a dream to reach the summit, but there is only one rope," Lhakpa said, "and there were so many traffic jams."

She passed 26,000 feet at around 10 p.m., and kept climbing into the death zone above 26,247 feet, where the chances of succumbing to high-altitude pulmonary edema or high-altitude cerebral edema — both of which can be deadly — rise with each passing hour. Lhakpa was breathing bottled oxygen, but those canisters only last so long.

When word of her summit push reached base camp, Shiny made a Puja, a Hindu ritual, to pray for safe passage. She had a walkie-talkie by her ear to hear the exact moment — 6:30 a.m. on May 12 — that her mother reached the roof of the world for the 10th time. But reaching the summit is only the halfway point. She was still in danger, and with 200 climbers coming up behind her Lhakpa didn't linger long.

She was out of food and water, utterly exhausted, and her anxious mind kept trying to convince her to sit down and rest as she suffered on the hike down the mountain. She fought that deadly impulse time and again by focusing on her children.

Shiny, who had always opted out of hiking trips back home, made the strenuous climb up to the first camp to celebrate with her mother. When Lhakpa arrived, Shiny saw her immigrant mother — who had worked so hard and overcome so much — in full bloom for the first time. Tears streamed down Lhakpa's cheeks, which had been baked to crackling from the sun and wind.

Though her accomplishment was splashed across the climbing press, sponsors still did not come calling. She arrived home in Connecticut with no job and bills to pay. Whole Foods couldn't bring her back on board for months. She had no choice but to clean houses again.

But Lhakpa didn't consider that a setback. And when those Whole Foods hours returned to her in September, she was already visualizing her next spring season in the Himalayas. She's planning to climb K2 in 2023, in addition to another summit attempt on Everest. This time, she hopes to bring both of her daughters to base camp, along with a team of girls from all over the world.

"I hope I will bring 20 daughters," she said. "I want to teach them climbing skills and show them that all girls can climb mountains."

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