Go Live Your Dream

Ken Brown, a pancreatic cancer survivor for five years, hiked the world's tallest freestanding mountain with his cancer surgeon.

September 17, 2018 By Ken Brown

Everyone has a story to tell. Mine begins in Tanzania in December 2011. I was 62 years old and returning to the airport after a safari in the Serengeti. Our guide stopped the bus and asked us to look at the horizon, where we took in the magnificent sight of the sun shining on Mount Kilimanjaro. I vowed that I would one day come back to hike Mount Kili.

In September 2013, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and my focus turned to survival rather than climbing a mountain. It is the third most deadly cancer and the only one with a five-year survival rate in the single digits.

But I was fortunate. My tumor was discovered early, I had amazing doctors and I responded well to treatment. In January 2014, I had the Whipple procedure, a complex surgery to remove my tumor, performed by Malcolm Bilimoria, MD, of Northwest Community Healthcare near Chicago. My chemotherapy ended in June 2014, and I now receive periodic CT scans to monitor my status.

During a follow-up scan in 2017, Dr. Bilimoria mentioned that he and some friends were going to hike Kilimanjaro in the fall. I told him that that was my dream but because of my age, cancer and heart issues, the dream had ended.

I mentioned Dr. Bilimoria's trip to my family. They reminded me that "life is about the journey" and encouraged me to at least attempt to fulfill my dream with the surgeon who helped save my life.

I spent the next four months training. The hike takes eight days and reaches an elevation of 19,300 feet. The major problem is adjusting to the altitude. At times, the training seemed overwhelming and I questioned my decision to attempt the climb. But the goal of pursuing a dream I had thought was no longer possible after my cancer diagnosis kept me motivated every day.

When I landed at the Kilimanjaro airport last September, I knew I had made the right decision. As I walked out onto the tarmac, tears started streaming down my cheeks. Despite cancer, I was fulfilling a goal I had set for myself years ago. The dream had finally become a reality.

It didn’t matter whether I made it to the top, and, in fact, I did not. On the sixth day, a heart issue required me to turn back. But it was still one of the greatest experiences of my life.

At my last scan, Dr. Bilimoria had a special gift for me: a plaque with a drawing of Kilimanjaro and the phrase “Go Live Your Dream.” I refused to let my cancer defeat me or limit what I could accomplish. A cancer diagnosis does not have to put an end to your ability to achieve your goals. I encourage everyone to go live their dreams.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/go-live-dream