

Father to go on fundraising climb up Mount Kilimanjaro

Parents vowed to bring life saving equipment to Buffalo after daughter's surgery

By Henry L. Davis

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Sam Kolich/Buffalo News

The surgical ordeal of Kristen Blaszczykiewicz, center, led to a vow from her parents, Debbie and Thomas, to raise money for medical equipment.

Thomas and Debbie Blaszczykiewicz nervously made a promise to themselves two years ago as their daughter underwent 14 hours of brain surgery in another city.

They would find a way to bring to Buffalo the expensive technology that doctors relied on to remove a tumor from her brain, saving other families from having to go elsewhere for the same care.

“It was one of those moments when you say, ‘God, if you help us with this, we will do something in return,’ ” said Thomas Blaszczykiewicz.

Next month, he and 19 others will try to make good on that promise by climbing 19,340 feet to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania in an unusual fundraising project that has grown in ambition.

The group hopes to raise \$1.75 million as seed money to buy an advanced MRI, recruit a researcher in MRI technology and build an imaging center in Amherst that specializes in scans of the brain and spine that will be shared by the Dent Neurologic Institute and University at Buffalo Neurosurgery.

“What started out with buying a piece of equipment has turned into creating a center of excellence,” said Blaszczykiewicz, president of AccuMED Technologies, a Buffalo company that makes high-tech fabrics for the medical, footwear and sporting goods industries.

It all started in 2005, when his daughter, Kristen, then 16, inexplicably felt her vision blur and hearing fade while she was driving with her mother on a learner's permit. Everything around her seemed to move in slow motion as she "zoned out," causing her to veer off the road and hit a tree.

The accident may have saved Kristen's life. She told her parents of similar episodes in the past, leading the family to visit the neurologists at Dent. Tests picked up a tumor in the left frontal lobe of her brain.

Doctors assured Kristen that the tumor could be surgically removed. But the family learned to their surprise that Buffalo lacked the equipment needed to accurately map a complex brain tumor so that surgeons don't disturb areas of the brain that control speech, movement and other important functions.

For Dr. Laszlo L. Mechtler, chief of neuro-oncology at Dent and Kristen's doctor, it was a frustratingly familiar experience and a reflection of the challenges with keeping up with the state of the art in medicine.

"I'm tired of watching my patients go out of town and losing them," he said.

The Blaszczykiewicz took Kristen to the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor for the operation. Everything worked out well. Now 18, she is symptom-free and preparing to attend Niagara University.

But Blaszczykiewicz didn't forget the promise.

Getting sponsors

In 2006, he raised \$60,000 from sponsors to climb Mount Ranier in Washington State. He gave half to the University of Michigan and half to Dent.

"No one had ever given us a donation of this sort," said Mechtler, who was intrigued by the gesture.

He asked Blaszczykiewicz about doing another fundraising climb, this time with Mechtler up Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa. Blaszczykiewicz immediately agreed.

They assembled a group of 20 people, including two former brain tumor patients, with each one raising funds from various sponsors. Blaszczykiewicz kicked in a large amount from his family, as well as from AccuMED customers and vendors. Mechtler sent fliers to current patients and families of deceased patients, telling them that he will plant a flag on the summit in their honor in return for \$100 donations.

"People responded. It was not difficult," he said.

The climbers have been training for six months by taking challenging hikes with backpacks. The six-day trek up Kilimanjaro is difficult. Many people fail to reach the top, mainly because of altitude sickness.

Still, Blaszczykiewicz and other participants have raised more than half of the money toward the goal and are excited about the project.

"We need this kind of technology," he said. "Others should have the same opportunity my daughter had."

At the start, the goal was fairly simple: Raise enough for a down payment on a \$2.6 million, high-powered 3 Tesla MRI.

Magnetic resonance imaging scanners use radio waves and computer programs, combined with a magnet that surrounds a patient, to produce detailed images of structures in the body.

Twice as powerful

Newer, more-expensive 3 Tesla MRIs are twice as powerful. Although the devices present technical challenges, they operate at faster speeds and can produce better images. This allows doctors to diagnose some illnesses earlier and to distinguish more clearly between normal tissue and tumor.

As the Dent physicians moved forward with their plans, Mechtler said, they joined forces with the UB neurosurgeons who wanted a 3 Tesla MRI for patients with spine problems. Together, they plan to break ground next month on a three-story addition to the Dent Tower on Sheridan Drive that will house the new imaging center.

As with other relatively new technologies, the medical community is still trying to figure out which patients get the most benefit from a 3 Tesla MRI. Health insurers remain reluctant to offer enhanced reimbursement until research shows a clear benefit for the more-powerful device, although the data looks compelling for its use in the brain.

As a result, few physicians and hospitals currently can justify the cost of a 3 Tesla MRI.

“It’s the usual struggle we face with determining a standard of care. The 3 Tesla costs more, and we expect it to be used. But we don’t want to pay more when it’s not warranted and wouldn’t change the treatment,” said Dr. John Gillespie, medical director of Independent Health.

Mechtler said the reimbursement issues ultimately will work themselves out as physicians and insurers determine when 3 Tesla is appropriate. There already are several 3 Tesla MRIs in Buffalo, he said, but none with the advanced capabilities planned for the Dent machine. Moreover, he said the Dent MRI will also incorporate research studies.