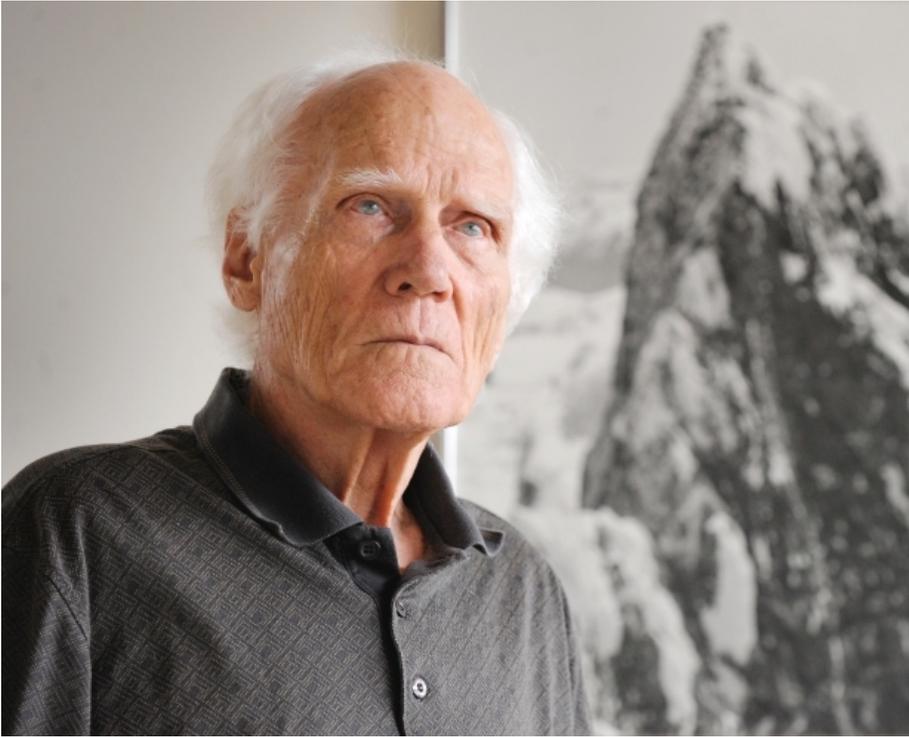


# McMartin: Life is a mountain for the Kafers to climb B.C. couple has scaled about 500 peaks and now Martin is setting out to become the oldest to top Africa's highest, Mount Kilimanjaro

By Pete McMartin, Vancouver Sun



Vancouver's Martin Kafer, 85, is endeavouring to become the oldest person in the world to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. He will lead an 11-member team up the Tanzanian mountain this fall, an effort that will raise funds for the Alzheimer Society of B.C.

**Photograph by:** Arlen Redekop , Vancouver Sun

When I grow up, I want to be Martin Kafer.

He has arthritis. He has had both hips replaced, one 11 years ago, the other three years ago. Both, occasionally, cause him pain. He has cracked a shoulder blade, torn ligaments in his legs and been rescued by chopper twice. The last time that happened was on a remote mountain on the Venezuelan-Guyana border. He was 80. He is now 85. In late September, he plans on being the oldest man to climb Africa's highest peak, Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. But more about that in a moment.

He was born in Switzerland, and came to Canada on July 1, 1954. He lives in Vancouver with his wife, Esther. He calls her "my queen." She, too, is Swiss. Their 60th anniversary is coming up next year.

They are, among other things, mountain climbers. They have climbed, Martin estimates, about 500 mountains around the world — in South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, here. For an engagement present, they bought each other a nylon mountaineering rope — nylon was new technology in those days.

Then they climbed Mont Blanc. Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in the Alps. For their honeymoon, they climbed the Matterhorn.

The Matterhorn is a hard and dangerous climb, and people die doing it.

"But then, we were hard climbers," Martin said.

It was on that Matterhorn trip that Esther saved Martin's life. He tumbled off a snow slope, and Esther, secured to Martin, checked his fall. The rope Martin's life dangled by was the nylon one they had bought for their engagement.

“That rope was the tie that binds,” Martin said.

Martin spent the majority of his working life at the University of B.C., where he worked as an electrical engineer. Their home, which Martin built, perches on the ridge of Mackenzie Heights, and offers a mountaineer’s view of the city. Esther worked as a bookkeeper for a travel agency, which figures because they have been just about everywhere. Namibia. Indonesia. Egypt. Pakistan. India. Mali. Bolivia. I could go on for another 50 countries. Mementoes of their travels — tribal masks, headware, sculpture, rocks — fill their home chock-a-block.

They are legends within the local climbing community. Martin was a founding director of the Federation of Mountain Clubs of B.C., and both are joint honorary presidents of the B.C. Mountaineering Club. Esther was its first woman president. In 2007, they were honoured with the B.C. Community Achievement Award for exploring and developing the province’s mountains and trails. They were, literally, trailblazers.

“When we started climbing here,” Martin said, “there were a lot of what we called ‘black spaces’ on the map — unclimbed mountains. There were hundreds of unclimbed mountains in B.C. at the time, and Esther and I did 75 first ascents of those mountains over those years, mostly in the Coast Range. In 1962, Esther was the first Canadian woman to climb Mount Waddington.” (Waddington, at 4,019 metres, is the Coast Range’s highest mountain. In their living room, the Kafers have a large photograph of Waddington’s peak. It’s a rock fang several hundred metres in height and terrifyingly steep.)

These days, the Kafers’ exercise regimen is less strenuous. They hike the North Shore mountains two or three times a week. They also downhill ski during the winter.

Lately, they’ve been leading training hikes for a group of much younger amateur mountaineers who will be tackling Kilimanjaro with Martin.

They and Martin are making up the 11-member team in this year’s edition of the Alzheimer Society of B.C.’s annual fundraising event, the Ascent for Alzheimer’s. It’s now in its 15th year.

Martin has a personal stake in this. His sister, Etta, 87, suffers from dementia. She requires 24-hour care in a home in Port Moody.

“She was brilliant,” Martin said. “She used to be a professor at McGill and was a research scientist in genetics. But now she doesn’t know where she is or why she is there. And she spends much of her day caring for a doll she has,” (and at this, Martin’s eyes began to water). “It’s a terrible condition. Terrible.”

By climbing Kilimanjaro, each team member hopes to raise at least \$10,000 for the society. Martin has already raised \$8,600, and while I was there, a cheque for \$100 arrived in the mail. (Anyone wishing to make a donation in Martin’s name, or any of the other team members, can visit the Alzheimer Society’s website at [www.alzheimerbc.org](http://www.alzheimerbc.org) or [www.ascentbc.ca](http://www.ascentbc.ca))

Kilimanjaro is not considered a tough technical climb, but it is a long slow slog because of the terrain and the threat of altitude sickness.

“I expect to have some problems with the altitude sickness,” Martin said, “but most people overcome it with medication or willpower.”

If he does climb it, it will make him the oldest person up Kilimanjaro by a year.

“I expect I’ll do it,” he said. “I feel great. You gotta keep going, you know. You don’t stop halfway there. If you’re going to keep yourself alive, you have to do the things you like.”

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