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Making a Difference

PilotPROJECTS

by Christina Ammon

WHO'S WHO PART I ▶ *Pilot Squash Falconer talks about adventure-philanthropy, her fear of birds, and her ambition to fly off the world's tallest mountain.*

Squash Falconer has a plan this March: to climb Mt. Everest and fly her paragliding wing off the top. The British pilot is eagerly preparing: running, cycling, and slogging up steep inclines with a heavy pack. She is also spending some high-altitude time in the French Alps.

"I'm not mad," the 29-year old insists, pointing out that she has the relevant experience to back the ambition. Over the past several years she's honed her skills on progressively more difficult mountains—from Aconcagua to Mt. Blanc, where she became the first woman pilot to fly from the top. But it was after reaching the top of Cho Oyu that her ambition for Everest really ripened.

"That's when someone said to me, 'You've climbed Cho Oyu?! The sixth highest mountain in the world! That qualifies you to climb Everest, doesn't it?'"

Using her Everest venture as a hook, she'll be raising funds for the Mount Everest Foundation for Sustainable Development in Nepal and Tibet. The organization supports local families to build schools, hospi-

[above] Squash Falconer climbing in the south of France.

[right] Squash is the first woman to solo a paraglider wing off of Mt. Blanc. Here she practices with her ultralite before her Mt. Blanc expedition. **[opposite]** Squash teaching arts and crafts as part of a service trek to a remote Nepali village called Jamphre, near Okhaldunga.

tals, and environmental projects in remote areas near Everest.

Here is how a friend of mine describes Squash Falconer: "She is beautiful, smart, has a wicked sense of humor and is absolutely fearless. She has everything going for her."

Add to that list a huge heart.

What would it mean to you to be the first woman to fly a paragliding wing off of Mt. Everest?

SQUASH: Of course, it would be incredible! Succeeding in any challenge you set for yourself feels good. The harder the challenge, the more rewarding it is to succeed. It would also create a much larger audience and give me a bigger platform to shout about my charities from! Hopefully it will motivate and inspire lots of people too!

A mutual friend of ours said you seem fearless. Is that true?

SQUASH: Not quite fearless. I've been lucky in that I don't have many fears, but when I feel it, it's terrible. I've been scared of birds since I was attacked by a cockerel when I was 3-years old. At nineteen, I had a near-drowning experience and suffered a fear of water for a good few years. Even now I still get very nervous.

I always thought that fear would mentally and physically paralyze me—that I'd be a bit of a wreck. But an incident on Mt. Blanc proved otherwise.

I was roped to my climbing partner on almost vertical ice when I slipped and fell, pulling him off the mountain with me. I



could hear my own voice saying “You have fallen off the mountain, Squash. Get your ice axe, stab it into the side of the mountain and stop yourself.” And I did. Twice. The first time I stopped, but my partner fell past me, pulling me back off. The second time, I stopped and, luckily, so did he.

Fear when I’m climbing and flying seems to do nothing but give me clear thoughts, a healthy respect for the surrounding environment, and a good dose of adrenaline—which helps me do whatever it is I need to do.

You’ve raised a lot of money through climbing expeditions in the past. Can you talk a little bit about your impulse to combine adventure and philanthropy?

SQUASH: From an early age, I had a vague awareness of raising money for charities because my school held annual fundraising events and my mum always put coins in donation boxes. But it wasn’t until I had a personal experience of a very close friend falling ill with cancer in my early 20’s that I developed the desire to raise money for specific causes. I found huge value in at-

taching fundraising to an event—in my case, an expedition. Not only do you feel good about doing something positive, but there is great potential to raise awareness of your own cause. You have a story to tell, a goal to reach, and an exciting adventure. The two go hand-in-hand together.

Does raising money for charity affect your climbing experience at all? Does it change the way you perceive challenges?

SQUASH: When I’m raising money for a good cause, it definitely makes a difference. Success is no longer just for me; it’s for me and the people I’m supporting. When the climb gets tough, I focus on the reason I’m doing it. This gives me strength and motivation.

Climbing a mountain and summiting is obviously good. Climbing a mountain, summiting, and having a positive impact on other people’s lives is really amazing.

What inspired you to get involved with MEFSD?

SQUASH: I was climbing Mt. Mustagata in

China, and one of the team members on the expedition died. It was absolutely devastating. His name was Jonathan Peacock, and he was only 39-years old with a beautiful wife, Katharine, and two young children. His wife was incredibly brave and decided to support MEFSD in Jonathan’s memory.

I was initially inspired to fundraise for the charity to support Katharine. But after raising some money, I began to feel a certain responsibility to see how it was being spent, and to see if I could make a difference personally, rather than just financially. The MEFSD actually invites you to participate in service treks. Twice a year, a trek goes to the remote villages in Nepal to assist in the schools and hospitals that MEFSD has built or supported.

Only after becoming involved did I become aware of the scope of Nepal’s problems. It’s the 17th poorest country in the world. It’s landlocked and has no exports. The population is huge. With 30 million people, it has the same population as California, but with a land area just 1/3 the size of California. Much of Nepal has no roads.



Nepal is famous for the Everest region, but that is only one valley. The rest of the country is extremely poor. Seventy percent of Nepal's people are low-income farmers. Kathmandu, the capital city, has a population of five million with very little infrastructure. There are no highways, nor public transport system. For much of the year there is no water, and electricity is switched off more than ten hours each day.

The biggest challenge?

SQUASH: Seeing the project through. Good intentions are easy, but change doesn't happen instantly. It can take years to make a noticeable difference, and it can be hard to remain motivated and committed. There are times when you come up against difficult and seemingly insurmountable problems. You realize that money can't fix everything; it's just a part of the solution.

Here's an example: in November I went on a service trek. We visited three schools that the MEFSO has been supporting for a number of years. At one school we found 60 children with just one teacher. There were supposed to be three teachers and 90 children. It turned out that the other two teachers only show up to collect their wages on payday, and many of the children simply don't attend.

It took time to figure out just what was going on. Surely if a teacher doesn't show up, they get sacked, right? But who were these teachers being monitored by? There was a committee made up of some parents and village elders, but it was the school chairman who seemed to be at fault. He drank too much and paid teachers who didn't come to work their wages. Perhaps he also kept some of those wages for himself.

Suddenly, things weren't quite so straight-forward. The chairman needed to be removed and a new chairman appointed. This required the rest of the village to really work together honestly and effectively as a community to resolve the problem. This takes time. We were very impressed that while we were there, the committee was to hold a meeting and the chairman would be removed. But we had to leave the village before the situation was finally resolved.

Pupil attendance is also a big issue. These children are not missing school be-

cause they don't want to go. It's because their parents keep them at home because they need help on the farm, and they do not see the value of education. The task here is to work with changing the mindset of the adults and the parents. This doesn't happen overnight.

What are you "getting back"?

SQUASH: To understand your impact, you really just need to see how eager the children are to learn. It's humbling to see how little the people have. On a service trek, you realize that by making a little effort, you are making a massive difference.

When you visit the hospitals and see the ratio of patients to doctors, you can't believe it's true. Then you discover some



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health clinics don't even have a doctor. When you actually see that, you realize what the MEFSO is doing with your help, and see how lives are being saved because of your work. It's quite amazing and motivates you to do more.

What would help?

SQUASH: Volunteers—both skilled and non-skilled. The service treks are a wonderful way to help out in a very practical way. Doctors and nurses are valuable to run clinics in the remote villages. Teachers are encouraged to come along and work at the schools. Even if you are not qualified, many of these people and children have such poor healthcare and so little education that even the simplest contributions make a difference.

You would probably be surprised at what you can do. On our recent service trek, we rapidly became involved in teaching simple sports games, showing kids how to use soap to wash their hands, learning the alphabet, writing basic words, drawing pictures on paper, and adding two plus two. These things we take for granted in our own countries are a huge deal for villagers who have no paper, no pens, have never used scissors, rulers, tape, or glue and can barely write their own name.

Donations to the MEFSO, no matter how small, help massively; every penny goes towards making a difference.

Advice for pilots wanting to make a positive impact:

SQUASH: When you go somewhere to fly, ask a few questions, find out what's going on in the area and figure out what is needed to help. It might be money, it might be labor, or it might be key skills. Once you work out what's needed, do what you can! 🇨🇪

Pilot Projects is a regular feature of USHPA magazine. You can help with this column by sharing your ideas. Have you come across do-gooder pilots in your travels? Do you have a project, or ideas for traveling more ethically? Don't be shy. You have no problem bragging about your sick Mac Twists and Rhythmic SATS. Time to throw down some good deeds. Send them to Christina Ammon at: flyinghobogirl@gmail.com