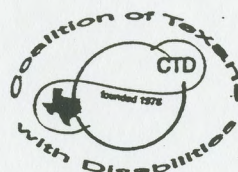


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## Trekkers Shatter All Doubts, Reach Mt. Everest Base Camp

### Austin mountaineer Gary Guller successfully leads largest-ever group of climbers with disabilities on historic expedition

AUSTIN, TEXAS April 6, 2003

They have achieved a goal many considered unthinkable. While most Americans slept soundly in their beds late Saturday night, a determined group of people with disabilities on the other side of the world made the final steps of an often grueling 16-day journey, reaching Mt. Everest Base Camp at 17,500 ft.

Said Team Leader Gary Guller, "I've never seen such a determined team, fully focused on achieving this goal and understanding the historic event that has taken place. We are feeling the effects of altitude and the time we have been on the trail, but we are thrilled to be here. Most folks are not aware that only 1 in 10 people ever reach the base camp of Mount Everest."

Team Everest '03, a benefit for the non-profit Coalition of Texans with Disabilities (CTD), began in Austin, Texas in January 2002 and included a host of public awareness events and intense preparation for all members. Guller made several training climbs on major mountains across the world, including Mt. Kilimanjaro, Mt. Aconcagua and Makalu and Baruntse in the Nepal Himalaya.

Members of historic Team Everest '03 at Base Camp include:

**Gary Guller**, 36, Expedition Leader with an arm amputation, Austin, TX  
**Mark Ezzell**, 39, with spina bifida, North Carolina  
**Sandra Murgia**, 43, with reflex sympathetic dystrophy, arthritis, leg paralysis, Austin, TX  
**Barry Muth**, 44, Community Integration Specialist with quadriplegia, San Antonio, TX  
**Dinesh Ranasinghe**, 25, with a leg amputation, San Antonio, TX  
**Matt Standridge**, 24, with paraplegia, San Marcos, TX  
**Christine White**, 50, with severe childhood hearing loss, Austin, TX  
**Riley Woods**, 28, with quadriplegia, Waco, TX

Team members **Gene Rodgers**, 47, a writer with quadriplegia from Austin, TX, and **Rob Rodgers**, 40, a salesman with clinical depression and an anxiety disorder from Parma Heights, Ohio, trekked to within three hours of Base Camp before a sudden medical condition unrelated to altitude struck Gene, forcing the brothers to head back down. Gene received medical attention and is recovering in Kathmandu.

**Tenzing Sherpa**, 40, with a leg amputation and **Lakpa Dorchi Sherpa**, 70, with an arm amputation, and **Kim Smith**, 38, Advocacy Coordinator with hip dysplasia, fibromyalgia and bipolar condition of Howe, TX, descended because of altitude sickness. They will wait at Pheriche, where the team will fly by helicopter to Kathmandu in about a week.

News of the successful trek reached Austin where Texas Governor Rick Perry said, "I applaud the members of Team Everest for this incredible accomplishment. They stand as a reminder to us all that each day represents a new opportunity to achieve new goals. And limits should never be placed on the ability of the human mind or the potential of the human spirit."

This portion of the journey a success, Guller and a high altitude team will attempt the summit, weather and conditions permitting. Guller hopes to stand atop the mountain in late May and become the first person with one arm to climb to the 29,035-foot peak.

"In climbing Mt. Everest, I hope to raise awareness and support for the potential of people with disabilities and to show that life and dreams continue," says Guller. "Team Everest '03 members embody responsibility, leadership, physical determination and strength. Team Everest '03 has a powerful message. It models how society can open the door of opportunity to all people, regardless of their ability or disability."

Before even leaving for Nepal, the Team's voyage generated a tremendous wellspring of interest and support, including seeing Guller and team featured on the cover of the new Austin 2003 phone book, *Time Magazine* and multiple radio, TV and print news stories. In addition, they received the Barbara Jordan Media Award from the Texas Governor's Office, and the Texas House of Representatives proclaimed March 4, 2003 as Team Everest '03 Day. In a congratulatory letter from the President's Council on Physical Fitness & Sports, Chairman Lynn Swann encourages all of America to follow the progress of the expedition.

Upon their arrival in Nepal two weeks ago, this unusual trekking team elicited unbelieving stares and understandable skepticism from locals and international trekkers and climbers. However, seeing first hand their determination and capability, incredulity has been replaced with admiration, congratulations, and awe. After having met trek team members one climber, an Indian reality TV show contestant traveling to Everest base camp noted, "I say what disability? They're doing it, and they're doing it quite nicely. These guys definitely rock!"

While an occasional individual with a disability has reached Base Camp, there has never been a cross disability group of this size on the world's highest mountain. Even more remarkably, five of the team members use wheelchairs. The team has definitely felt the effects of altitude and the time they have been on the trail.

According to Dennis Borel, CTD Executive Director and Team Everest '03 Project Director, the Trek will prove that everyone can truly have the freedom to explore and live productively if only given a chance. "We are sending a message to the world that there really is unlimited potential to work, play and have a full life if you live with a disability. It is time to shatter the assumptions and discrimination still held by so many. Yet, even as the team continues this incredible journey, the Texas Legislature is slashing services that allow many of them to live successfully in the community," says Borel.

Team Everest '03 still needs to cover expedition expenses and plans an April 17 fundraiser at Mother Egan's in Austin. The event will welcome home members of the disability trek team with top local musicians. A panel discussion with the trek team members will be held at 10:00 am, also on April 17, at the CTD offices. Persons interested in donating or learning more may visit [www.teameverest03.org](http://www.teameverest03.org)

For more information about Team Everest '03, the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities, or Gary Guller, please contact Dennis Borel, M-F days at (512) 478-3366, other times at 512/431-1656 or 512/443-6038.