

## No mountain too high

Gisele Mansfield and Liza Badham will climb Mount Kilimanjaro to raise money for African grandmothers. 'That's just our first mountain,' the two tell Don Butler.

**Don Butler**

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When Gisele Mansfield decided earlier this year to climb Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro to raise money for African grandmothers, she hoped to raise \$1 for each of the mountain's 19,341 feet.

The goal, she thought, was ambitious but achievable. If she could raise about \$1,000 a month, she'd reach her target by October 2007, when the Dunrobin grandmother hopes to celebrate her 55th birthday on the summit of Africa's highest mountain.

Her first fundraiser was in July. What's happened since, even Hollywood might hesitate to script. Within 100 days, she reached her fundraising goal and has now doubled her objective to \$2 per foot. More wondrous still, she acquired a remarkable partner: a great-grandmother from Fitzroy Harbour named Liza Badham.

The two had never met when Ms. Badham read about Mrs. Mansfield's quest in a West Carleton newspaper. Now they are comrades-in-arms in an enterprise some call reckless, but they consider the adventure of a lifetime.

Mrs. Mansfield, a voluble financial analyst with the National Arts Centre, admits she's had her doubts at times.

"I'm not a mountain climber and I'm certainly not an outdoors person. I'm not a camper. I don't like doing any of this stuff."

While climbing Kilimanjaro isn't technically difficult -- about 15,000 people attempt it every year, many of them tourists -- it's an arduous climb. More than half don't reach the summit, and a few have died in the attempt, usually from altitude sickness.

"It's something that requires a lot of fortitude, a lot of stamina, a lot of willpower," says Mrs. Mansfield, who worries about hitting a mental wall in the thin air.

Her partner dismisses such doubts. "Oh, that's just our first mountain," Ms. Badham scoffs. Has she ever scaled a mountain before? "Not yet," she answers, then breaks into uproarious laughter.

Ms. Badham, a journalist who has eight grandchildren and "one and a half" great-grandchildren, may be the most exuberantly youthful great-grandmother ever. Lithe and lean, with a mop of reddish-blond hair, she lives alone on her 170-acre farm near the Quyon ferry dock.



**CREDIT: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen**

*Gisele Mansfield, above left, a grandmother, and Liza Badham, a 65-year-old great-grandmother, plan to climb Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro next fall to raise money for the Stephen Lewis Foundation's grandmothers campaign. The pair hope to raise \$2 for each of the mountain's 19,341 feet, and have collected \$21,000 so far. The money will be used to help grandmothers care for AIDS orphans in Africa.*

One of her daughters let slip last spring that she was celebrating an important birthday, which she reluctantly concedes was her 65th.

Not that she thinks chronological age means anything.

"I work hard," she says. "I chop wood and carry wood, and I have the gardens and clear the bush. I mean, I've tried just about everything. I don't think there's anything I can't do. I really don't."

But Ms. Badham keeps the focus on her climbing partner.

"It's Gisele's baby," she insists. "I'm just here to help her rock the cradle."

Mrs. Mansfield first formed the ambition to climb Kilimanjaro about a decade ago, after reading about the ascent in Michael Crichton's book, *Travels*.

The last time she raised the idea, her husband Michael Mansfield, who has been confined to a wheelchair since suffering a stroke in 1999, told her, "You're not getting any younger. Just go."

After that, she resolved to make the climb for her 55th birthday next October. But she soon concluded she needed a greater purpose so she wouldn't lose her nerve and back out.

She quickly decided that raising funds for HIV/AIDS would be her cause.

"It had to be AIDS," Mrs. Mansfield says, "because I was going to Africa." Besides, her younger brother, Michel Lalonde, had died of the disease in 1995. "I said, OK, I can do this in his memory. He can inspire me to get to the top."

Then fate intervened. Last March, as she was dressing for work, she happened to hear Stephen Lewis on Canada AM talking about his foundation's new Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign, which raises money for African grandmothers raising children orphaned by AIDS.

"That's the one that gives me goose bumps to this day," she says. The grandmothers' campaign was the final piece of the puzzle.

"From that point on, all the cards were dealt to me, and all I had to do is play them out."

Her first fundraiser -- a barbecue at her home -- raised more than \$4,000. A friend's line-dancing group in Orleans contributed \$5,700 from a line-dancing workshop and other schemes. An organization called the GiveMeaning Foundation kicked in \$5,000. And when Mrs. Mansfield let it be known that she'd like to reach her dollar-a-foot goal by her 54th birthday this past October, a donor in England put her over the top by writing a cheque for \$2,342.

Mrs. Mansfield is overwhelmed by the response, but not really surprised.

"This cause is something that people just don't want to say no to," she says. "It strikes a chord in everybody who hears about it, and they want to do a little bit."

After reading about Mrs. Mansfield's plan, Ms. Badham immediately recognized a soulmate. "I had to climb with her," she says. "There was no doubt about it."

Mrs. Mansfield's cause resonated because Ms. Badham has been to Kenya twice as a volunteer with Help the Aged Canada, a non-profit organization that assists the impoverished elderly.

"That first time, when I came home I was changed, I really was," Ms. Badham says. "Africa's really dear to my heart."

Both women attended a gathering of African and Canadian grandmothers organized by the Stephen Lewis Foundation in Toronto in August. Meeting the African grannies only strengthened their resolve.

"Now I have faces and names to go along with my motivation to climb," says Mrs. Mansfield. "I don't want to let them down at all.

"The world has let them down for too many years."

So far, the two have collected about \$21,000, with more fundraising projects planned in the new year. At this pace, getting to \$2 a foot shouldn't be a problem.

There's still a mountain to climb, of course. The two women haven't begun serious training yet, but will step up the pace next summer.

But Mrs. Mansfield is more and more confident they'll reach the summit.

"That's just going to be a cakewalk," she says boldly. "Because it's going to happen.

"It's just a matter of me playing the cards right."

For more information on the climb, and to donate, see [www.gigiclimbskili.com](http://www.gigiclimbskili.com) .

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