

*Bob Dole*



NEWS

U. S. SENATOR FOR KANSAS

FROM:

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## ERIK WEIHENMAYER

### DOLE CONGRATULATES BLIND MOUNTAINEER ON MOUNT MCKINLEY FEAT

WASHINGTON -- Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole delivered the following statement late yesterday on the floor of the U.S. Senate:

On Tuesday evening Erik Weihenmayer and his climbing partners reached the summit of Mount McKinley, 20,320 feet into the Alaskan sky and the highest point in North America. Mount McKinley is called "Denali"--the Great One--by Native Alaskans.

Under the best of circumstances, Mount McKinley is one of the toughest climbs in the world. Average daytime temperatures are a bonechilling 20 degrees below zero, dipping to 40 below at the summit. The National Park Service reports that the success rate for reaching the top is just 47%. Since 1913, 79 climbers have died on the mountain. Six died earlier this year.

Mount McKinley is the ultimate challenge for any serious climber. But it is a unique challenge for Erik Weihenmayer, who is blind. Erik was born with limited vision, and lost all his sight by age 13.

Most of the time, Erik is a 26-year old fifth-grade teacher and wrestling coach in Phoenix, Arizona. About 10 years ago he took up mountain climbing. He uses two ski poles to locate the footprints of the hiker ahead of him, and then steps in the same tracks. To maintain balance and direction, Erik hangs on to a taut rope tied to his partner. Other than that, he carries the same gear and equipment as other team members.

As Erik has said, "I may do things a little different, but I achieve the same process. . . . There's very little my team has to do to accommodate me."

Over the past 10 years, Erik had trekked the Inca Trail in the Andes of South America, the Rockies in Colorado, and other demanding spots around the world.

On June 9th, under the sponsorship of the American Foundation for the Blind, Erik and four others set out to conquer the summit of Mount McKinley. The other members of the AFB HIGHSIGHTS '95 team are Sam Epstein, of Tempe, Arizona; Ryan Ludwig of Laramie, Wyoming; and Jeff Evans and Jamie Bloomquist of Boulder, Colorado.

The AFB HIGHSIGHTS '95 team prepared for this climb for eight months, with rigorous training. Since January, the team also climbed Humphrey's Peak near Flagstaff, Arizona; Long's Peak in Colorado; and Mount Rainier in Washington State, all in blizzard-like conditions.

The American Foundation for the Blind deserves great credit for making this climb possible. Founded in 1921, AFB is one of the nation's leading advocates for the blind.

AFB's motto is "We help those who cannot see live like those who do." Erik exemplifies this spirit. Early on, he decided that "Blindness would often be a nuisance, would always make my life more challenging, but would never be a barrier in my path."

The message of AFB HIGHSIGHTS '95 is universal, extending well beyond blindness. It inspires all of us to realize our potential rather than focusing on our limitations.

Coincidentally, Tuesday also marked the 115th anniversary of the birth of Helen Keller. For 40 years, Helen Keller was AFB's Ambassador of Goodwill. At the age of 74, on an around the world flight, she said, "It is wonderful to climb the liquid mountains of the sky. Behind me and before me is God and I have no fears." I imagine that Erik and the AFB HIGHSIGHTS '95 team have been similarly inspired.

Let us wish Erik Weihenmayer and his climbing partners Godspeed and a safe return.

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