THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

The 50 Peaks That 'Changed My Life'

Dr. Douglas Butler and a climbing guide were trekking to the summit of Wyoming's tallest mountain, Gannett Peak (13,804 feet), when danger struck.

They had gotten off route and the morning sun began to loosen large rocks from steep snow-covered slopes on both sides of the trail. "Fortunately, they were coming down one at a time," said Dr. Butler, a family physician who lives in Crumpler, N.C.

They dodged the falling rocks and escaped unharmed. It marked the most threatened Dr. Butler felt in his quest to reach Gannett and the highest geographical points in the other 49 United States, a pursuit—known as highpointing—he began in 1999 and completed in 2003.

The idea came from one of his high school teachers in Denver. "He had gone to Kansas, which was a 2-3 hour drive from Denver, and spent most of the day trying to find that state's high point, because most of the hills in West Kansas are about the same height. He said it took him just about the whole day to find the correct hill. As a teenager, the quest seemed odd but intriguing to me. As my life went on, it seemed less odd and more intriguing."

Dr. Butler starting visiting mountain peaks when he was in his mid-30s. He initially was drawn to remote destinations such as the volcanoes in Mexico and Ecuador, and Aconcagua, the highest peak in the Americas. "Then I got to thinking the state high points would be neat to do."

Now 53, Dr. Butler wrote a travel memoir about his journey, "A Walk Atop America: Fifty State Summits and a Dream to Reach Them All" (www.awalkatopamerica.com). "People [enjoy] the way I did it, not just doing peak to peak but seeing the country and meeting the people near the peaks. …People helped me. This is a great country, full of good people.' "

Dr. Butler topped most of the summits in 2000 and 2001. Most were accessible by automobile or by 2- to 5-mile hikes, but five required assistance from guides: Gannett Peak,

COURTESY DR. DOUGLAS BUTLER

Dr. Douglas Butler, a family physician, is shown here scaling Mount Rainer.

Mount McKinley in Alaska (20,320 feet), Mount Rainier in Washington (14,411), Granite Peak in Montana (12,799 feet), and Mount Hood in Oregon (11,239 feet).

His effort to reach Panorama Point, the highest summit in Nebraska at 5,424 feet, would have been thwarted were it not for the kindness of perfect strangers. The 20 miles of dirt road leading to the peak were covered with 6 inches of snow, and a blizzard was approaching. "I had this little rental car. I got about one-third of the way. … It was getting dark." He flagged down a farmer, who took him to his house and "called somebody with a four-wheel drive, who drove me to the farm where the high point was. People left their dinners; they did all of this for a stranger."

These kinds of encounters "changed my life," said Dr. Butler, who is a locum tenens physician with Project USA, which provides medical care for Native Americans. "Physicians don't get [much] kindness from anybody except their patients. To get out and see that kindness made me want to go back in a system where I can work more directly with the patients and not have to fight the reimbursement systems. That's one reason I chose [American] Indian health."

"There are some mountains I'd like to climb in South America, but the knees and the hips aren't what they used to be." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau