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Georgia Briscoe

University of Colorado Law School

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Climb High: High Altitude Mountaineering Lessons for Librarians*

Georgia Briscoe**

Many of the attributes necessary to climb high mountains are the same as those needed for a successful career in law librarianship. Ms. Briscoe describes nine lessons that can enhance both a career and a climb.

¶1 Law librarianship and high altitude mountaineering are activities that are not normally associated nor compared. Yet I have found many similarities between the two. These similarities came to me on a recent climb of Denali (also known as Mt. McKinley; 20,320 feet) in Alaska when the cloud in which I walked allowed me to see only four feet in front of myself. This gave me ample time to ruminate and compare my immediate situation on the mountain with my career as a law librarian.

¶2 In more than twenty-five years as a librarian, most of my career has been spent as a technical services law librarian.¹ However, I've also worked in the circulation and reference departments of law libraries, in medical libraries, in both public and technical services in large academic libraries, and as a student employee typing labels and shelflist cards. I also worked several years as a library technician before and during library school. I have served nearly eighteen years as a department head or with other management responsibilities.

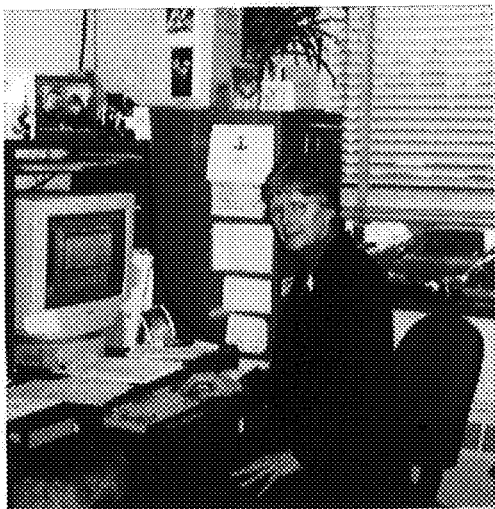
¶3 My second "career" as a mountaineer began early in my life when I graduated from the Spokane Mountaineers' Advanced Mountaineering School while still in high school. College and a family slowed my climbing for several decades, but a mid-life move to Colorado definitely put me back on the fast track in the mountains. I climb either with my family or with fellow members of the Colorado Mountain Club. Like many mountaineers, I started with a goal to climb the "14ers" (peaks over 14,000 feet.)² When that goal neared completion, it was on to higher and more challenging peaks in the game known as high altitude

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** Associate Director and Head of Technical Services, University of Colorado Law Library, Boulder, Colorado.

1. University of San Diego Legal Research Center, 1979-92; University of Colorado Law Library, 1992-present.

2. There are seventy-one peaks over 14,000 feet in the contiguous United States, including fifty-four in Colorado, fifteen in California, and two in Washington.



mountaineering. “High” mountains are generally those over 16,000 feet and, of course, include the highest mountains in the world. My major climbs to date include the highest peaks on five continents.³

¶4 Though this may come as a surprise to some who think that what we do as librarians is *down-to-earth*, all of this climbing has actually been a great *boost* to my career as a law librarian. In this article, I am pleased to share with colleagues and future librarians (and climbers) some of the

lessons I have learned in climbing high mountains that have also helped me as a law librarian.

Follow the Leader

¶5 Climbers wear a harness around their waist and legs which is attached to a rope; one to four other climbers are attached to the same rope. The rope is for the safety of all the climbers because it provides the way out of a crevasse or stops a falling climber. Climbers who do not follow the leader by climbing at the leader’s pace will create serious problems for the rope team. A climber who goes slower than the leader will cause the whole team—connected by the rope—to slow down. Or a climber trying to go faster than the leader will cause slack in the rope, an extremely dangerous condition because it allows a falling climber to increase speed in the fall, making it harder for team members to stop the fall and probably pulling the whole rope team off the mountain or into a crevasse.

¶6 Throughout one’s career, a law librarian will always have a leader or boss—even a library director reports to a dean, a board of trustees, or a partner. The best way to enjoy a job and be appreciated in it is to follow your leader, to support your boss. This means accepting the leader’s goals and following along at the same relative pace to meet those goals. For librarians who cannot support their boss and “buy into” their agenda, it is probably time to find a new boss, or, as we

3. My continental summits include Kilimanjaro (19,340 feet) in Africa, Aconcagua (22,834 feet) in South America, Elbrus (18,510 feet) in Europe (Alps), Kosciusko (7,328 feet) in Australia, and Denali (20,320 feet) in North America. I hope to climb Mt. Blanc (15,771 feet), the highest peak in Europe-Asia (Caucasus), next. Unfortunately—or perhaps it is fortunate—the highest peaks in Antarctica (Vinson Massif; 16,864 feet) and Asia (Everest; 29,028 feet) are beyond my financial resources.

say on the mountain, “get on a new rope team for the climb.”

¶7 Selection of a climbing leader or professional leader should be taken very seriously. This is someone whom you must be able to trust with your life or your career. It is therefore very important to know the leader well enough to be able to decide whether your style and pace will mesh with that of your leader. Leadership styles vary. Some leaders share power and authority, some do not. Some micromanage, and some



are laissez faire. Whatever the qualities of your leader, be sure you can follow him or her without causing problems and that you can learn in the environment created by the leader’s particular style. A library career—and a climb—will be greatly enhanced if you can not only follow, but also can support and assist your leader whenever possible.

¶8 Leaders will not be able to make the best possible decisions 100 percent of the time. Too many factors and variables cloud decisions. So don’t expect everything your leader does to always be for the best. You must take the bad with the good, making the best of each situation and moving on. On the mountain, balking and complaining about a leader will do no good and may even lead to dissension on the rope team that could cause the party to falter and not make the summit. In the library, complaining and not accepting the decisions of the leader can result in personnel disasters, which may easily affect the services the library offers.

Prepare Properly

¶9 Climbing a mountain takes serious preparation. First, the physical training must occur. Your body won’t be able to climb mile after mile with fifty pounds on your back (and thirty pounds dragging behind you in a sled) unless you have prepared by gradually adding more miles and pounds to your exercise routines. Nor will you be able to climb a mountain unless you’ve learned what gear is necessary, acquired it, and practiced using it. Can you imagine climbing a high mountain where you know the temperatures will reach forty degrees below zero and your sleeping bag is only rated to zero? This would be a needless risk.

¶10 The same applies to law librarianship. A bachelor’s degree and a master’s in library science are the basics. A J.D. degree is desirable, and it is required for many positions, especially in academia. A second master’s degree or additional professional degree may be considered acceptable in academia for positions other

than director or public services. After these degrees are earned and experience is gained by working in different positions, there are still times when technology catches up with us and we must take a special class to learn about the latest software applications or hardware developments. Taking a job without the adequate preparation is risky to your own career and to the library that hires you. Almost everyone knows people in professional positions who aren't ready for them yet—they haven't earned the basic degrees or kept up with technology. And most likely, you don't want to be on their rope team!

Pace Yourself

¶11 High altitude can be very dangerous. Decreased barometric pressure causes a climber's lungs to absorb less oxygen, which negatively affects all bodily processes. Adverse weather and topography add to the danger. Climbing up a big mountain too fast is a good way to get altitude sickness. Altitude sickness comes in various forms from just feeling lousy to HACE and HAPE,⁴ both life threatening. If you pace your climb properly, however, you allow your body to acclimatize and you conserve energy needed to make the summit and return safely. Most climbing accidents occur on the descent, generally because energy is low and climbers are rushing the pace to get off the mountain and back home quickly.

¶12 In a professional career it is also necessary to pace yourself. Much of what a law librarian learns is acquired through "on the job" experience. If a law librarian tries to rush the pace by skipping over entry-level jobs or moving up the ladder too fast, there is usually a price to pay later when the information not learned and the experience not gained combine to create problems.⁵ Likewise, if a librarian progresses too slowly in his or her career by remaining in one position too long, it may be harder to later move up the professional development ladder. Pacing a library career—and a climb of a mountain—usually means progressing at a slow but steady pace. Taking time to acclimatize at each level is essential to success in both endeavors.

¶13 Of course there are times, both on the mountain and in a career, when one needs to move quickly: to take advantage of good weather or of an excellent mentor. But more often than not, we go slowly and carefully on the mountain because of difficult terrain, bad weather, sick climbers, etc. In a law library career, going slow is especially wise when we have a difficult assignment or project that should not be done in haste. Obvious examples are migrating an automation system,

4. HACE is High Altitude Cerebral Edema, the accumulation of fluid in the brain. HAPE is High Altitude Pulmonary Edema, the leaking of blood into the lungs.

5. An example is an individual with a J.D. degree who, after subsequently adding an M.L.S. degree, immediately moves into administrative positions in an academic law library, bypassing important experience at the reference desk, the circulation desk, or in technical services.

moving a library, or writing a strategic plan. Completion of a well-done project will enhance a career faster than leaving it half-done or doing it poorly.

Prove Yourself to Your Guide

¶14 When you sign on to a climb, your leader or guide may not know you very well. Perhaps you were accepted on the climb solely on the basis of your climbing resume and references. In this situation, your guide will need to quickly verify your capabilities on the mountain. For example, the climbing leader needs to know how fast a climber can move off a precipitous ridge if a storm is quickly approaching.

¶15 The library leader also needs to verify the capabilities of newly hired librarians. The leader needs to know how much he or she can rely on the staff to meet the needs of the library's patrons. How well can the new catalog librarian keep up with the acquisitions? How thoroughly and fast can the new reference librarian search the databases?

¶16 In any new job or on any new climb, the leader, guide, or boss is testing you. The best thing to do is accept this fact and welcome the opportunity to show your capabilities. Teach that advanced class in HTML, take on the recon project or migration, be willing to carry extra weight in your pack or climb the extra mile! Whether on the mountain or in the library, perform at your highest ability so your leader knows what to expect from you.

Support Your Teammates

¶17 Collegiality among climbers can make the difference between a successful climb and a failed summit. So we learn on the mountain to carry our load, pull our weight, do our part. If we come to a scary stretch on the climb, we belay⁶ our fellow climbers whenever they feel the need for extra protection.

¶18 Similarly, collegiality among librarians and staff can make the difference between a successful library and one that fails to serve its clientele effectively. When fellow librarians or staff members are having a rough time at work or in life, give them the extra support and help they need. Don't wait for them to ask . . . just do it.

¶19 Climbing requires a lot of energy, both physical and mental. Daily living tasks at high altitude take a lot of extra work. You arrive at where you want to put up camp after a long hard day of climbing, and you still have to dig a platform for your tent, unpack your backpack, put the tent up, saw blocks of snow to build high walls around your tent, dig a pit or cave for cooking, set up your stove, find clean

6. A belay in its simplest form is a rope that runs from a climber to another person, the belayer, who is ready to put immediate friction on the rope to stop a fall.

snow to melt for drinking water and cooking, and a myriad of other tasks. Rest doesn't come for several hours after you arrive at camp. The best way to get all these jobs done quickly and efficiently is for all members of the team to pitch in and help.

¶20 In a library, as in all organizations, the 80/20 rule⁷ applies. This rule, by its definition, means that not all members of the team will help out equally. And this is true in most of life. Indeed, "life is not fair," and if you expect it to be, you will always be disappointed. So get used to doing more than your fair share and you'll never be upset. It means you are a strong climber and can carry more than your load. It also means you are a very valuable librarian who will give extra value to your library. And while it doesn't happen all the time, carrying the heavier load or working beyond the norm in the library may reap special benefits and rewards for you.

You'll Always Be Hot or Cold

¶21 Climbing takes a lot of energy so you work up a sweat fast even on the coldest of days. But by definition, high altitude mountaineering means you will be cold as soon as you stop climbing. Walking on a glacier sounds like a cool undertaking. But as soon as the wind stops and the sun comes out you might as well be in an oven.

¶22 Likewise, the temperature of a librarian's position is rarely "just right." In my career it seems like it is boom or bust, feast or famine, too calm or downright crazy. In technical services, the workflow is rarely steady with just the right amount of mail arriving for processing each day. Projects often come in spurts, and deadlines all seem to arrive at the same time. At the reference desk, either no one is there or it's a long line of patrons anxious for help. What's a librarian—or a climber—to do? "Get used to it, adapt, and go with the flow." Bucking Mother Nature has never been a good idea—finding harmony and accommodation to her is better.

Be Motivated for the Goal

¶23 The goal of mountain climbing for most climbers is reaching the summit and returning safely. For others, the adventure, experience, and camaraderie are goals enough even if the summit is not attained. It takes a great deal of motivation to withstand the rigors of a high climb. Thin air is hard on the body and the mind.

7. The 80/20 rule, developed by Vilfredo Pareto, suggests that 80 percent of an organization's productivity comes from 20 percent of its staff, and 80 percent of its problems also come from 20 percent of its staff.

Perhaps that is why so few people climb at high altitude. The few who climb are really motivated, and they make a commitment to the climb.

¶24 And what is the goal of a library career? For some it is to be a library director, department head, or perhaps just to be the best at whatever position you have. Offering the best library services in your area or developing a superior collection with outstanding bibliographic control are excellent goals for which to strive. Whatever the goal, motivate yourself! In the *Employee Handbook of New Work Habits*, one of the important ground rules for job success in the information age is to “manage your own morale.”⁸ It is common these days for employees to think that management is responsible for employee morale. If library staff attitudes go sour, it’s the boss’s fault. Certainly, the way the library is being run and the way people get treated must be reckoned with. But taking charge of your attitudes and motivation will make the normal bumps and problems of any organization much smaller.

¶25 Part of being motivated for the goal or mission of your library or career is committing fully to your job. Just putting in time and going through the motions was never professional. But it is even less acceptable today when the marketplace is so demanding. Expect your employer to expect more from you. We must all work faster and better to keep up with patron expectations and leader expectations—and it will help you make the summit much easier!

Expect Bad Weather

¶26 High mountains stick up into the atmosphere so high that they create their own weather, and it is often treacherous. A good climber is always prepared for the worst. However, occasionally you will be surprised by wonderful sunny minutes, days, or even weeks that make all the work of climbing in bad weather worthwhile. These are the moments for which many climbers climb. Your body is performing at peak efficiency, and the scenery is so pristine and grand that your spirit soars. You experience total joy, peace, and oneness with your world. You can hope that this peak experience will happen on every big mountain you climb . . . but don’t expect it.

¶27 And don’t expect the peak experiences to come often in your library career either. Much of any job is just being there, showing up, and being responsible and reliable. Try to find joy and accomplishment in the everyday tasks of librarianship; if you have peak experiences in the library often, all the better. But remember that bad weather is also part of any organizational environment, including the library. In fact, unpredictable weather is more common than it used to be

8. PRICE PRITCHETT, *THE EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK OF NEW WORK HABITS FOR A RADICALLY CHANGING WORLD* 38 (1998).

because the fast pace of technological change requires almost constant adjustments just to stay current with modern practices.

¶28 Reduced budgets, personnel problems, and technology problems can all cause bad weather in a library. The best way to get through these periods is to be optimistic and remember that the sun will eventually come out. Everyone who has the fortitude to stay on the climb and stick to the job has battle scars. Don't wear yours like a martyr; just accept that they are part of life.

Accept the Risk

¶29 Climbing a mountain is a risk for many reasons. You can fall and get hurt, you can get sick, you can freeze, you can get blown away (literally). If you are extremely concerned about these risks, don't climb. Successful climbers accept them and do their best to be prepared to deal with the risky situations. Ambiguity and uncertainty are part of the game and much of the fun.

¶30 Being a law librarian in modern times also means accepting ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk. Libraries and the role of librarians are changing daily. Modern job descriptions and job titles are often unrecognizable from the "good old days" of catalog librarians and reference librarians. The modern library is characterized by new expectations, shifting priorities, and new reporting relationships. A librarian's role may be vaguely defined and include frequently altered assignments. The capacity to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty has become a critical attribute in the workplace, just as it is in mountain climbing.

Conclusion

¶31 My climbs of high mountains have usually been successful with a beautiful fifteen minutes or so on the summit. Sure, they have taken a tremendous effort, but most of the time they also have delivered a great sense of accomplishment and joy. To be sure my climbs are safe and fun, I am careful to follow the lessons I've learned in the mountains over the years: I follow the leader, prepare properly, pace myself, prove myself to my leader, support my teammates, accept the conditions even when the weather and companions are bad, and most important, I motivate myself. My library career also has been a great deal of work, but it too has been very rewarding—partially because I do my best to apply these same lessons. I hope readers will benefit from them as much as I have.