

Long's Peak Challenge, our last story, epitomizes the journeys we all have taken. Climbing a 14,255-foot peak in Colorado is not for everyone, but as many of our authors have learned, meeting life's challenges, no matter what they are, strengthens us. So too for Jaimie as she confronts the physical and mental challenges of the climb.

Long's Peak Challenge

Jaimie Hall

MY ALARM RINGS AT 2 A.M. IT'S NOW OR NEVER. I DRESS, CHECK my pack. I need to be on the trail to climb Long's Peak by 3 a.m. so I can be headed down before the usual early afternoon thunderstorms. I park at the trailhead, elevation 9,500 feet, sign in, and at 2:50 start up the trail. I am carrying about twenty pounds—a gallon of water, rain gear, heavier clothes, plus plenty of food. Not eating and drinking enough can cause altitude sickness and fatigue.

The trail switchbacks through Goblin Forest. In the moonlight trees are transformed into creatures. I shift between excitement and assurance to wondering what I am doing here.

I emerge to cross treeless tundra to Chasm Lake Junction. Somewhere between there and the Boulder field, I join a group of three hikers: two college-aged kids, Ty and Sarah, and a man about my age, Bill. We reach the Boulder Field as the sun rises, a red ball. The diamond face of Long's Peak looms before us. We have come 5.9 miles and are at 12,760 feet.

Frigid air whips over the mountain pass. I add clothing and take a bite of my frozen Power Bar. I remember the guidebook: the last 1.6 miles after the Boulder Field, with an elevation gain of 1,500 feet, is the tough-

est. We must climb around the mountain to the back side before making our final ascent.

The Boulder Field looms before us, a stretch of car-sized boulders. Jumping from boulder to boulder we gain another 500 feet. At the Keyhole, I am suddenly looking over a two-foot ledge—straight down 1,000 feet. The mountain completely drops away. Pushing fear back, I crawl to the left across the narrow ledge to the trail. Then we follow painted bull's-eyes, which will guide us along the rest of the trail to the top. We're in the shadow of the mountain, winding our way along a narrow trail. A ribbon of climbers stretches ahead.

Around yet another bend, we reach the "Trough," a path through loose rocks and stones at about a 35-degree angle. Now, at above 13,000 feet, every step is an effort. I stop to catch my breath every few steps. Ty is feeling light-headed. The Trough seems never-ending. Bill, traveling slowly, is hidden from our sight below. Finally after surmounting the last slippery rock with virtually no handholds, Sarah, Ty, and I climb through the hole in the skyline formed by two rocks.

We are thrust out into the sunshine on a ledge aptly called the "Narrows." The whole mountain drops straight down more than 2,000 feet from the skinny ledge we have to walk for the next quarter mile to the next edge of the mountain. A woman behind us sobs in sheer terror. "I'm scared too," I tell her. There are handholds on the rocks, in most places for both hands, in some, only on the cliff side. My pack rubs. I don't want to leave it, but what if it pushes me out too far over the ledge? Ty waits for Bill; Sarah and I go on. Holding on for dear life, we inch our way to the end of the Narrows. Nearing the end, we have to work our way around a small boulder, practically hanging out over the edge of the world. I focus totally on my feet and hands. We make it and collapse.

We turn and look up at the "Home Stretch." Climbers had made it sound like we'd be walking up a steep slope. WRONG. We see people crawling up a crack in the sheer rock wall. I want to turn back. I've never done any real climbing. Not when a mistake would be fatal. My pack throws my balance off slightly, making me more nervous. I am pushing questions out of my head about getting back down. If I think about that,

I'll never go on. Finally Sarah and I look at each other. We just do it. We follow the crack straight up the mountain. I turn off all thought, putting one hand and one foot in front of the other and look only that far in front of me.

11 a.m.: Exhausted, as much from terror as muscle fatigue and lack of oxygen, I am at the summit at 14,255 feet. A sob nearly escapes. I fight for control. I can't give in to emotion. I still have to get down. The top is about the size of a football field, covered with rocks. The sky is blue and clear and I can see practically forever. To the north is the historic Stanley Hotel in Estes Park where I am working this summer. To the east are the plains. We stand above neighboring mountains, stretching endlessly before us.

Bill and Ty arrive, we eat lunch, take pictures to commemorate the occasion, and sign the log. At least twenty other climbers share the summit with us. The woman who cried at the Narrows is there. I congratulate her.

As we rest, a woman explains she goes down on all "fives" — counting her butt. Her method becomes mine. Going down is even more of a strain on already exhausted legs and nerves. The world drops away before me. Thunder and Lion Lakes, mere dots, are more than 5,000 feet below. We make it down the Home Stretch.

Then back through the Narrows. The constant drop-away is nerve-racking. My legs are shaky. My mind thinks "Stop," but I must keep going. I alone am responsible for getting myself down. At least breathing is easier now. With no thunderstorms looming, we aren't pressured by time.

The loose rocks in the Trough take constant vigilance. Stepping down strains already aching, tired leg muscles even more. Hands, sore from death grips on the rocks above, must be ready to grab hold at any moment. One step, then another.

Finally we are headed to the Keyhole. Incredibly, we are passed by five Mennonites. They carry no water or food. The two women wear tennis shoes, dresses, and light jackets. The men wear traditional clothes plus light jackets and baseball caps. They must have arrived at the top while we ate. They breeze by us, showing no signs of fatigue.

3 p.m.: We are back through the Boulder Field. We are taking frequent long breaks, longer than if I were alone. However, I feel a loyalty to my adopted hiking group for giving me moral support all this way. Only 5.9 miles. I will my legs and feet to keep moving. I know all about Ty's mountain biking adventures and plans to major in nursing in college. Bill is trying to mend relationships with his children, devastated by divorce. Sarah will soon head home to Minnesota to resume college.

Finally, we are back. It took us fifteen hours, longer than any of the other eighty climbers this day. Our sense of accomplishment is not dimmed by this fact.

As I look back, setting a goal, pushing my limits was the high. Facing danger, mastering emotions, and coming out unscathed is growth, no matter what the challenge. I am, in a sense, born anew. I have shed my current shell, much like a crab does, and emerged slightly enlarged. I carry the strength from this day within me forever.

Jaimie Hall and her husband Bill sold everything and hit the road in 1992. They work about six months of the year, usually at national parks. In addition to co-editing this book, Jaimie authored Support Your RV Lifestyle! An Insider's Guide to Working on the Road. See <http://www.rvhometown.com>.