

# SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

**JANE LEE** not only beat the danger of avalanches, 118-mile-an-hour winds and low oxygen levels to summit Mount Everest, she made history as part of the first all-women team from Singapore to accomplish the feat. The postgraduate student reveals how climbing has taught her diligence, teamwork, adaptability and perseverance.

**L**ife on the highest mountain in the world was anything but a breeze. For two and a half months in 2009, Jane Lee – and five other female members of the Singapore Women's Everest Team (SWET) – learned to survive not only in the harshest of temperatures, but also in the most primitive of conditions at Everest Base Camp.

As temperatures plunged to as low as minus 73 degrees Celsius after sunset, the team huddled in small 2m by 2m tents to keep warm. They had to get used to cleaning their bodies with wet wipes. Frozen laundry was a norm. Despite the inconveniences, Jane and her team remained focused on their goal of reaching the summit of the 8,850m mountain. In May, they prepared themselves for the summit push by ascending from Everest Base Camp – at



5,320m above sea level – to Camps One, Two and Three repeatedly over several weeks. These acclimatisation “cycles” at a slow and steady pace helped them to get used to the altitude and eventually aided their final ascent to the summit on 20 and 22 May.

“We divided into two teams to maximise our chances,” says Jane, who led the first team to summit successfully. “When the second team radioed us the next day to let us know that they had made it to the top, and that everyone was safe and sound, we were elated.” Not only had the team overcome the risks of avalanches, 118-mile-an-hour winds and low oxygen levels to summit Mount Everest, they were also the first all-women team from Singapore to scale the peak.

“When I climb, every moment is enjoyment to me,” reveals Jane. “The summit is just the icing on the cake – it gives me a goal to look forward to.” With the completion of one climb soon came the desire for another. From 2010, she went on to scale the Seven Summits – the highest peaks of seven continents, including Everest, Kilimanjaro, Denali, Elbrus, Aconcagua, Kosciuszko, and Vinson – and she eventually became the first female from Southeast Asia, and the 37th woman in history, to do so.

For Jane, who recently graduated with a Master of Business Administration from Yale University, mountaineering is more than just a sport. Over the years, the passion to climb more mountains has kept her motivated and has continued to inculcate in her the values of diligence, teamwork, adaptability and perseverance. In short, her passion for climbing has prepared her for life.

## CHILDHOOD ADVENTURES

Growing up, Jane had an active and adventurous childhood. Playtime was constantly filled with outdoor activities such as riding a bicycle, flying a kite, or going fishing. Her father – businessman Lee Hua Lam – believed in letting children experience nature as much as possible.

When she was just four, he tossed her into a waterfall pool in Kota Tinggi, Malaysia. The family, including Jane’s mother Susan Sng and two siblings, was there for a weekend getaway. “There! Swim!” her father commanded, as he stood by the edge of the pool to ensure that she would not be in any danger. As the proud father expected, Jane struggled and splashed around, but somehow managed to stay afloat and swim. “That became one of my very first lessons in life – just dive in!”

Her love for the outdoors continued into her teens. By then, she was

studying at the Raffles Girls’ School (RGS). “At that time, RGS was one of the only two schools in Singapore with an outdoor adventure club. So, I consider myself fortunate to have been exposed to such a wide range of outdoor sports and activities from a young age.” Soon, Jane realised that she really enjoyed hiking and trekking, and went on to scale nearby peaks like Gunung Tahan and Mount Ophir in Malaysia.

By the time she turned 18, Jane had made her first trek to the Himalayas. She says: “I managed to convince two friends to hike to the Annapurna Base Camp (ABC) in Nepal with me.” Armed with little more than a printout of some Internet guides, and clad in a cheap windbreaker that was later bartered for a Tibetan dzi bead, the trio reached ABC. There, Jane looked around and saw that while the ABC was their destination, it was merely the starting point for other climbers.

That was a moment of stark realisation for Jane. “I figured that if a group of six-foot-tall men who lived in arctic temperatures through the dead of Russian winters could climb a mountain, then so could I – notwithstanding the fact that living in Singapore, the coldest it ever gets is in an air-conditioned room, and the tallest ‘hill’ we have is a 164m bump in the ground.”

She returned to Singapore with a burning desire to climb. “I climbed my first mountain in the New Zealand Alps in 2003

with my university mountaineering team,” says Jane, who majored in English Literature at the National University of Singapore (NUS). In 2004, she scaled Island Peak, her first Himalayan peak in eastern Nepal. “The most significant memory from my university years is the 95% of the time that was devoted to climbing, training, or thinking about climbing. Probably only 5% of my time was spent cramming Shakespeare and Dante!”

## COMMITMENT TO HARD WORK

By 2005, Jane found herself leading the Singapore Women’s Everest Team (SWET), comprising co-leader Sim Yi Hui, logistics in-charge Joanne Soo, communications in-charge Lee Peh Gee, medic in-charge Lee Li Hui and media relations in-charge Esther Tan. They were the country’s first all-women team, juggling climbing responsibilities with full-time jobs. Jane was then a student development officer at Republic Polytechnic.

“The idea for an all-female Everest team actually came about in 2004,

“CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST  
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and we thought it would be pretty awesome to put together such a team as it had never been done in Singapore or Southeast Asia," says Jane. "People usually have this impression that mountaineers are big, burly, bearded men, but I believed that ordinary women like us could also undertake such an endeavour." Over the next five years, Jane and her teammates would prove their mettle.

Once the goal of summiting Mount Everest was set, Jane committed herself to the hard work involved. She trained six days every week, twice a day. The all-round training included long endurance runs, short interval runs, circuit training on stairs and weights training in the gym. As part of the training regime, she also climbed a 30-storey Housing & Development Board (HDB) block with 22kg loads for 12 sets per session. "Since we lacked mountains in Singapore, we climbed high-rise buildings instead. We saw it as an exercise in creativity," she laughs.

For technical training, SWET also scaled various peaks, such as Mera Peak in Nepal, Cho Oyu in Tibet, and peaks in the Four Sisters Range and elsewhere in China. They had the guidance of Lim Kim Boon, a climbing instructor based in the United Kingdom. "He was a half-strict coach and half-indulgent father figure. While he would insist that we load our backpacks with 20kg of rocks for circuits on an icefall in China that simulated the terrain on the Lhotse Face on Mount Everest, he would also appear mid-circuit to deliver a snack or an encouraging pat on the head."

It was tough, but never once did Jane and her teammates ever consider giving up. Jane, the self-acknowledged "slave driver" of the team, explains: "Challenges, like unpredictable weather changes, were aplenty on the mountains. As these were out of our control, it was important that we were as prepared as we could possibly be. Being fit took away some of that fear and uncertainty."

After Jane finally scaled Everest, NUS awarded her the "Outstanding Young Alumni Award" in recognition of her achievements. For her, Mount Everest meant more than just the world's highest peak – it also represented a powerful lesson that determination pays off. "We spent five years training for the expedition. I felt that all the hard work was worth it," says Jane. "This really proved to me that as long as you set your mind to your goal and work towards it, you will succeed."

## ADAPTABILITY IN TEAMWORK

The period that Jane took to plan, train and climb Mount Everest was life-defining. "The six of us had to do everything ourselves, from looking for sponsors to marketing our team to holding publicity events," explains Jane. "We even learned first aid and fixed our solar-powered communications system ourselves."

It helped that each member of the team had different strengths. For Jane, that was a real-life paradigm of how each member of a team could contribute in different ways towards a common goal. "Climbing Mount Everest taught me so much about teamwork," she says. "Before the expedition, I used to think that strong, effective leaders had to be "take-charge" types. Later I realised that leadership should also be about building a strong, talented team from within."

She applied this philosophy to her studies at Yale, harnessing the individual talents of her fellow students in group projects. "If I was in a leadership position, I kept an open mind and made sure everyone's opinions got heard." This has a lot to do with adaptability as well, notes Jane. "Everyone had a different working style, so I had to adapt quickly and effectively to that."

Likewise, adaptability is a skill that Jane has learned from mountaineering. In 2005, during an expedition to Muztagh Ata in Xinjiang, China, she and her team came to a point where they had to decide between risking a summit attempt in bad weather and retreating to base camp for safety. "We opted for the latter – and it turned out to be the wiser decision," says Jane. "In no other sport is adaptability more important than when you're on a mountain. While we should always be well-prepared, it's also crucial to be able to improvise and think on your feet."

## PERSEVERING ON THE PATH

After her Everest feat, Jane became a professional mountaineer, securing corporate sponsorships for her climbs. She counts scaling Mount McKinley (or Denali) in Alaska in 2010 as one of her more challenging climbs since Everest. "We did that independently, without guides and carrying our own supplies," says Jane.

It was a physically tiring climb. At one point, she had to be on the move for more than 24 hours without rest. "This is when climbing becomes a mental challenge as much as a physical one. When you've climbed for a full day, the mind takes over and keeps the body going. You can always take another step,

it's whether you want to." When she summited Denali, Jane truly felt that she had improved as a climber.

This level of mental perseverance has also influenced her studies at Yale. "I took a big leap, from an English major to a business school student. I was never good in math, but I kept trying and trying in all my assignments until I eventually got better at it," says Jane.

With the rest of SWET, Jane also took time to give motivational talks at organisations and schools. "For us, Everest was a literal mountain to climb. But it is also a powerful metaphor that can be applied to any life goal, from scoring straight As to being the next Fandi Ahmad." The most important lesson that she always tries to pass on, is the courage to dream. "Too often,

we are caught up in what we think is doable right now. But that limits us." She advises: "Keep your head in the clouds, but your feet on the ground."

**“THERE'S NO LIMIT TO HUMAN POTENTIAL.”**

And true to her nature, Jane is now choosing the road less travelled once again. She has been taking a break from professional mountaineering since 2011 when she began her studies at Yale, although she continues to find time to climb. But rather than starting her own adventure company – like most would expect her to – Jane will soon join McKinsey & Company as a consultant. "It's definitely a departure."

But as expected, the challenge does not daunt her. Jane says: "Since I have successfully climbed Everest, I will take the lessons learned from the mountain as a form of personal encouragement." And as she prepares for the next phase of her life, she is the living embodiment of her own belief that "there's no limit to human potential."

## VALUES

Teamwork • Diligence • Commitment • Perseverance • Leadership

## REFLECTION

1. Like Jane, everyone has an "Everest" in his/her life, a seemingly impossible goal that requires resourcefulness, teamwork, and discipline in thinking and action to achieve. What is your Everest? What values are you bringing to bear to achieve this goal?
2. What kind of approach do you have to life? What goals do you set for yourself? What goals have others set for you? Are they similar or very different?