

Tahoe rock climber shares her big mountain stories

By Terra Breeden

It's not always about the summit. This is something rock climbers have to come to grips with.

Professional rock climber Emily Harrington shared her experiences of big climbing this week with an audience of nearly 50 at Blue Angel Café in South Lake Tahoe. The North Shore resident spoke of the triumphs and the peaks that still need conquering.

"Thanks to a lot of hard work and luck, I've had the opportunity to travel to some amazing places, but it was not without struggle," Harrington said. "I get scared of the path I've chosen, and I worry about the longevity of my career."

For Harrington, her rock climbing experiences would not be complete without the influence of the people she has met in the span of her career. She attributes her success to the friends and relationships she's had over the years, saying they have shaped her life even more than rock climbing.



Emily Harrington on a climb in
Yosemite National Park.
Photo/Provided

During the presentation, Harrington talked about these relationships and how they have influenced her life, starting with her close friend Michelle Parker.

A professional big mountain skier from Squaw Valley, Parker joined Harrington and a group of other Tahoe skiers on an Ecuador ski-mountaineering expedition to Cotopaxi, the famed, snow-covered and active volcano. According to Harrington, the three-day journey up Cotopaxi was fraught with danger from high wind to mud-soaked roads and horrendous weather – “the worst in decades.”

But for Harrington, even though the group was deterred by conditions and was unable to ski the slopes of the volcano, because of Parker's positive outlook, the trip was a success.

"Certain people make you feel like everything is a good time, even when it's not," Harrington said. "We are lucky to call her a Tahoe local."

Harrington also talked about her relationship with her mentor and professional mountaineering-skier Hilary Nelson, who was just proclaimed National Geographic's 2018 adventurer of the year.

In 2014, Nelson took Harrington on a 900-mile overland journey through Myanmar to summit Hkakabo Razi, one of the most remote mountains in the world. The duo took almost every mode of transportation available in the developing country to reach the mountain. They boarded a bone-shaking train known as the "death train" because it hadn't been updated since 1948, they clung to the back of motorbikes manned by Myanmar locals down boggy, mud-soaked roads, and when the roads finally petered out, they walked. Harrington and Nelson hiked 125 miles through the Burmese jungle to get to Hkakabo Razi.

"I did not grasp what I'd signed up for; it was an expedition," Harrington said. "Hilary is a purist at heart, and this was her adventure."

When they finally reached Hkakabo Razi, the climbing conditions were horrible. The loose, crumbly rock threatened to come away in the climbers' hands as they scrambled for the summit. It was dangerous. Harrington was scared and completely out of her comfort zone.

"If something happened, there was no rescue; it wasn't like modern expeditions," Harrington said. "We had underestimated the trip and the mountain. It was too technical and too dangerous, and we had pushed ourselves to the limits."

Harrington and Nelson never made it to the summit. After a lot of discussion, they camped out on a ledge for a few days with the summit in sight and 1,000-foot drops on either side. Then turned back, hiking the 125 miles back to civilization.

“It sucked. But in the end, I realized that the trip was about patience,” Harrington said. “I hope that 15 years from now I will continue to have the drive and passion that Hilary does.”

Originally from Boulder, Colo., Harrington is a Tahoe-transplant who moved here six years ago to join her partner Adrian Ballinger, a professional mountain guide and founder of Alpenglow Expeditions, who Harrington met on Mount Everest in 2012.

“Thankfully, I’ve discovered that it does snow here and that there is amazing granite for climbing,” Harrington told the audience.

Blue Angel Café donated the space for the evening and it was awash in sultry, low lighting with a bar serving wine and craft beer to guests. The event was conceptualized by Lake Tahoe photographer Corey Rich.

“I met Emily when she was 15-years-old and immediately she seemed super smart, talented, and was an incredible athlete,” Rich told the audience. “In 16 years, nothing has changed.”

The 31-year-old Harrington is a sprightly, fierce woman with blonde braids coiled around her head. Although Harrington has claimed five national titles in rock climbing, summited Mount Everest, and free-climbed El Capitan in Yosemite, the talk wasn’t as much about her athletic career as it was about the people who have shaped it.

Harrington began rock climbing competitively when she was 11-years-old and has been pursuing the sport ever since, gaining world recognition for her technical climbing feats. Although she started as a gym-climber, over the years she has

transitioned into outdoor climbing, ice climbing, and mountaineering.

“It’s because of these people that I keep believing in myself and have the courage to keep going,” Harrington said. “So I want to encourage others to get out and be uncomfortable and afraid, and find those things that forces them to grow.”

Harrington continues her adventures next week with a rock climbing expedition to Spain and plans to spend her summer climbing in Yosemite.