

Sometimes, Life Exceeds All Expectations

Lucy Lionberger Rise '78 climbs out of her comfort zone and into peak performance.

When **Lucy Lionberger Rise '78** climbed Denali in the spring of 2022, she was one of 1,000 climbers ready to summit the tallest mountain in North America. Of those 1,000, 16% were women; of those women, the average age was 28. Rise, at 61, was the oldest woman on the mountain to summit. "I don't fit the profile of average climbers. I can't think, 'I'm too old,' 'It's too late,' or 'I'm not smart enough or fast enough.' We all can do a lot more than we think we can. You may or may not achieve it, but you won't know until you try," she said as she discussed her climbing adventures from the last several years and the six climbs on the horizon.

Near the top of La Vierge du Flambeau near Chamonix in June 2023



It all started when a friend whose husband had climbed decided she wanted to create a women's climbing group. At 49, Rise was recruited to make her first ascent: Mount Kilimanjaro. Before being asked to go, she was admittedly not conditioned for the task. "It seemed like a fun thing to do. At the time, I was working out a little in the gym and doing a couple-mile run here and there. I've never been particularly athletic; I was always the last person picked for sports in school. So, obviously, I had to start training for the climb. And I did it. I made it to the top."

The driving force behind her climbs is complex. "A lot of the time when you're doing this, it's sort of miserable. You're cold. You're tired. You desperately want to stop. You go way past your 'I've had enough' points. Then it becomes mind over matter even when you're thinking, 'Why did I do this again? This is terrible.' And yet, somehow, when I get back down, and it's all over, I find myself immediately searching for my next adventure. So there's something about getting through it and accomplishing it. And I'm reminded that it's like a lot of hard things in your life where you forget all about the pain, and all you can remember is how you made it through." After that first ascent on Kilimanjaro, she was smitten with the challenge, took training to heart, and booked her next climb: Mount Rainier.

MOUNTAIN (AND LIFE) MINDSET

Rise may not have realized that her late-70s Mary Institute biology class laid some groundwork for a mountain-climbing mindset. "We were learning about the human body and the different systems. When we got to the final, the teacher listed just one question for a two-hour exam: 'You've just gone into a cafe and ordered a roast beef sandwich on rye. What happens next?' So I

start writing furiously, and I know I have to slow down and think of all the steps: you have to start with your teeth and your tongue, and then it goes down your throat, and the digestive process that sends nutrients into the blood, and so on. I remember being so focused and determined to regurgitate everything I learned all semester and put it into practice and onto the paper."

A storied tradition at MI was the Senior Chapel, where each senior was in charge of a particular chapel assembly. They would choose a topic and lecture or educate their fellow students on it in addition to leading the hymns and other elements of the chapel experience. When it was Rise's turn, she shared her fascination with and knowledge of Aesop's Fables. The fables often held morals or ways of thinking that contributed to her mindset and helped create mantras for her life that stuck with her over the years, such as "'You're as happy as you have a mind to be' or 'Don't whine, dig deep, figure it out.'"

After obtaining a degree in Art History from the University of Virginia, Rise moved to Washington D.C., where she worked for the RNC and the Reagan administration, then pivoted to New York City, the fashion industry mecca, for a robust career with Adele Simpson and Liz Claiborne. After her third child, she and her husband returned to Richmond to welcome their fourth and settle the children into schools. There, Rise then embarked on "every imaginable parent volunteer job at St. Catherine's and St. Christopher's Schools"—schools much like MICDS—and lovingly attended a monumental amount of practices, games, rehearsals, plays, concerts, and more for their four active children, in addition to volunteering for several local non-profit organizations.

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01. Rise with the MI acapella group "Senior Singers."

02. At MI, Rise's biology class laid the groundwork for a mountain-climbing mindset.

03. Aesop's Fables helped Rise create mantras for her life.



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“I had never pushed myself out of my comfort zone to such a degree before, and here I discovered that I could. The feeling of getting to the top of a mountain is a true high, a total rush. And looking down from the top is the most exhilarating feeling in the world.”

LUCY LIONBERGER RISE '78

Years later, with Kilimanjaro in her rearview mirror, she set her sights on her second climb, Mount Rainier. “The night of the summit was crazy. No one had gone up for days because the winds were 70 miles per hour. Once the winds died down, we decided to go for it. It was freezing cold, and they were concerned about avalanche issues. The week before our climb, someone died and was buried in an avalanche. That night, we learned that someone from another group had dropped off his rope team and was lost. So a search helicopter was whirring above, and we were just being blown all over the place. Only four of our group of 11 climbers made it to the top. It was this climb that separated those of us who were crazy enough to keep going and those who were happy to stick to hiking and trekking,” Rise said.

When her son Christopher asked her to do Rainier again this year as his very first climb, she was elated. “He’s my baby. Of course, I’ll do it,” she laughed. “Rainier is a good stepping stone for anyone who wants to get into climbing because they have a lot of guides there to help novice climbers. They have great training where they show you how to walk with a rope team, ‘pressure breathe,’ do the ‘rest step,’ and arrest your fall or someone else’s. So, for a first climb for him, it was perfect, far less harrowing, and a fabulous mother/son memory.”

What serves her climbs well is a memorable moment in seventh grade that links to her organizational skills and drive to make the most out of each climb. “Mrs. Stryker, in seventh grade, was known as the hardest teacher in Middle School, and I was afraid to be in her class. But when I got there, I realized she wasn’t scary; she was just insistent on doing things right. Mrs. Stryker taught me how to write a semester-long term paper with research, note cards, footnotes, and a bibliography, and we were graded on all the details. She taught us how to organize. I never

01. Lucy on the summit of Rainier with her son Christopher in July 2023

02. Lucy’s family at her son’s wedding.

had a class like it before or since.” That early skill development prepared her for all her careers, parenting and, naturally, climbing. “You work on packing and climb prepping constantly. It requires a lot of organization to pack everything you need, but ONLY what you need that you can carry. No redundancies. These trips sometimes last for weeks, where you are pushing 30-40 pounds of food on sleds while carrying 40-50 pound packs on your back. You constantly edit.”

THE SIX SUMMITS

Rise has climbed all over the world, summiting 15 mountains on islands and glaciers, including five of the famed “Seven Summits:” Mount Everest, Mount Aconcagua, Denali, Kilimanjaro, Mount Elbrus, Mount Vinson, and Carstensz Pyramid. At press time, she has done all but Vinson and Everest. She trekked to Everest Basecamp at 17,000 feet and summited Island Peak, a 20,000 peak also in Nepal, which is as close as she is getting to the summit of Everest. “Everest is a very dangerous mountain with many issues, so I have no interest in climbing it,” she said.

Since climbing, she has summited approximately one mountain a year, but this year has escalated the pace. “My reasoning is that I’m 63 now, and it isn’t going to be easier at 64 or 65. I’ll just keep going until I can’t go anymore,” she said. So, this past summer, in addition to Rainier with her son, she summited Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps, and the Grand Teton in Wyoming. In October, she will attempt Mount Aspiring in New Zealand and Vinson in January, and she has plans for the Matterhorn in Switzerland and Chimborazo in Ecuador next summer and fall.



01. Lucy at the summit of Denali in June 2022.



02. Carrying packs and dragging sleds on Denali in June 2022.



03. Climbing in Smith Rock State Park in August 2018 to train for Carstenz Pyramid



04. Climbing Seneca Rocks in West Virginia in June 2023 to train for the Grand Teton

The journey hasn't come without injury. Rise has broken ribs rappelling down an 800-foot headwall at 20,000 feet and days from home. Some climbs have local dangers, such as warring tribes in Papua, and weather challenges like sinking into snow up to her hips or jumping outrageous gaps. She even broke an arm during a slip in training, spurring a year off from climbs. None of that seemed to deter her.

Despite her achievements climbing various mountains worldwide, her priorities remain well-grounded. Hands down, she said her greatest accomplishment is her four children. "As a parent, you just want them all to be happy, on a good path, and doing good things. They have checked every box." As far as climbing goes, she holds a perspective that can apply in all situations, whether facing challenges or not. "All you can do is stay positive, don't give up, and don't let people put limits on you."

Rise's senior page in the MI 1978 Chronicle has a solitary quote, "Sometimes life exceeds all expectations." She shared, "In my case, it has. I had never pushed myself out of my comfort zone to such a degree before, and here I discovered that I could. The feeling of getting to the top of a mountain is a true high, a total rush. And looking down from the top is the most exhilarating feeling in the world."

Lucy's Summits

Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, Africa—2009

Mount Rainier, Washington, United States—2010

Cayambe & Cotopaxi, Pichicha & Cotopaxi Provinces, Ecuador—2011

Mount Everest Base Camp & Island Peak, Khumbu Glacier & Sagarmatha National Park, Nepal—2012

Mount Elbrus, Prielbrusye National Park, Russia—2013

Nevado Urus & Ishinca, Cordillera Blanca, Peru—2014

Mount Aconcagua, Argentina—2015

Carstenz Pyramid, Papua, Indonesia—2018

Mount Dickey, Denali National Park, Alaska, United States—2019

Denali, Denali National Park, Alaska, United States—2022

Mont Blanc, the Alps, France/Italy/Switzerland—2023

Mount Rainier, Washington, United States—2023

Grand Teton, Wyoming, United States—2023