

PRESS RELEASE

Issued by Matrix Advertising & Communications

This article is written in acknowledgment of World Lymphoma Awareness Day (15 September 2010)



A Tale of Six Wigs

Ilse-Mari Hanekom wore six wigs during what she calls her “year of cancer” in 2008.

In May this year the 32-year-old Fourways financial manager buried a snippet from each of those wigs at the summit of the highest peak in Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania.

Led by Robby Kojetin, who became the 17th South African to summit Mount Everest last year, Hanekom – known for her television appearance on Big Brother - and fellow Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma survivor Lionel Greenberg, took on Kilimanjaro to demonstrate that lymphoma can be beaten, given early diagnosis and treatment.

“Every night I would cut a piece of the ‘wig of the day’ – they were blond, short red, black, brown long, funky and long reddish - off and put it in a bag. On the top of Uhuru peak, I took all six pieces of my wigs, dug a hole and buried them.

“I wore my wigs to inform women with cancer that you can still feel and look beautiful while having treatment. I left the pieces of my hair behind because I was closing my cancer chapter and opening a new one after climbing Africa’s highest mountain. Now I want to live life and have healthy experiences.”

Born in Newcastle in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Hanekom spent most of her youth in the former homeland of Venda (Limpopo) with her parents, three older sisters and a younger brother.

“It is absolutely beautiful there. The countryside is filled with unspoiled land, unexplored waterfalls, and great spots for braais in the forests. We went there all the time. We then moved to Balmoral near Witbank where we lived on the Hertzog farm. (Her great-grandfather was General JBM Hertzog, who became South African Prime Minister in 1924.)”

Her childhood dream was to be successful, independent and financially stable. “I know, it sounds very serious and unadventurous, but through it all I always wanted to enjoy life and do a few crazy things that I can write in my little black book. I absolutely love exhilarating things and unknown adventures and it seems like I am doing it; Big Brother, beating cancer and climbing Kilimanjaro. I’ve always wanted to be a mother-of-five, and I still do!”

She studied B.Compt Accounting Science with Honours and is financial manager of a company called Platinum Planet in Fourways. Next year she writes her board exams to qualify as a Chartered Accountant.

Her cancer experience began when she noticed a swollen gland in her neck, which her doctor attributed to sinuses. Swollen glands are one of six symptoms of lymphoma, however six months later there was a slight pain in her shoulder and this time it was thought to be a sprained muscle.

“After two years of constant pain and going back and forth to the physio to get more ‘ultrasounds’, ‘needles put in my shoulder’ and more “exercise”, the pain got so unbearable that I decided to see a shoulder specialist.

“The shoulder specialist couldn’t understand the pain, as my muscles were intact and nothing was wrong there. After an X-Ray and a MRI scan they found my shoulder bone had been eaten away by something – TB, 3rd degree infection or maybe something cancerous. Lymphoma can often be misdiagnosed as the symptoms are similar to TB and flu, for example swollen glands, night sweats and extreme weight loss.

“They were unsure what had caused the bone to be eaten away and they had to do a biopsy on my shoulder the next day. Three days later I got a call to inform me that I had lymphoma and that I was in the fourth stage already.”

She was devastated, having just completed her Honours degree and gotten engaged two weeks before.

“No one in my family had cancer and I didn’t know what to do. What I knew about cancer is that you die when you are diagnosed with it. One of my best friend’s mothers died of breast cancer a few years ago and that’s all I knew. “That’s why the best thing I did was to go and research cancer. The day that I heard I had Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma cancer, I read up on the internet about the signs, the symptoms, what my body was going to go through, how the treatment would affect me and the others around me – and this was the best I could do – gather information and equip myself with the knowledge of my condition. One of the reasons for climbing Kilimanjaro was to create awareness of lymphoma and the importance of early detection. Although I was diagnosed in the fourth stage, I want people to know how important early diagnoses is and how it can change your prognosis and treatment.”

Hanekom received chemotherapy combined with targeted therapy (also known as immunotherapy). Targeted therapy specifically targets the cancer cells and stimulates the body’s natural defences – the immune system – to kill cancer cells. This combination of treatment eventually saw her into remission. “The lowest point was definitely when my oncologist told me that my hair will be falling out within 12 days of my first chemo, and so it happened. To see my hair falling out in bunches and all my hair lying on my bed every morning like a dog shedding hair was just such a downer and was one of my breakpoints in my cancer journey.

“Thank goodness for the six stunning wigs I got. With them I felt beautiful every day and strangers would even comment on my shiny, beautifully cut, healthy hair. Little did they know.”

When she heard an Advertising Agency was searching for cancer survivors to climb Kilimanjaro she thought “I’ve always wanted to this. It was a perfect fit!” Fortunately Hanekom and Greenberg had significant experience hiking in the Drakensberg, but there was still plenty of preparation ahead.

“There’s a ‘little’ – okay, not so little – hill behind the Westcliff Hotel in Johannesburg. Robby told us that if we can do 10 sets up and down in an hour, we will be ready to climb Kili. Oh, my goodness! Ten? I could only manage seven and by the next day I could hardly walk!

“Other than the killer hill I went to do a few hikes in the Drakensberg. The gym thing didn’t work so well, as the people would stare or giggle or feel sorry for my silliness, when they saw me gyming with a back pack, not even to mention the humungous shoes I was wearing.”

The ascent commenced on May 3 and the first leg to Umbwe Caves - an ascent of 1490 meters over 18km - was a seven hour hike through terrain consisting mostly of rain forest.

The next day’s climb took them to an altitude of 3500m, and by the following day they were approaching the freezing level.

On Thursday, May 6 they were on top of the Baranco Wall, a steep 270 meter scramble topping out just below the Heim glacier at an altitude of 4100 meters. Every day was tough.

What were her climbing companions like?

“Other than being the King of the Kilimanjaro Jungle (as he has done it five times now), Robby is very knowledgeable about climbing and surviving on the mountain. We thought many times we were close to death as we couldn’t breathe, but then Master Robby would come and relax us with breathing exercises.

“He was a true hero for us all, and should they force me to climb Kili again – I will take Robby with as ‘life support’.

“Professor Lionel was a different story however. He was our mentor and informant throughout the whole trip. He could talk for hours and hours as we climbed. He was always there to chat the day away. Quite refreshing, but not when it came to bedtime. Let’s just say his evening name is ‘potent gasman.’”

They departed for the summit at midnight the next day, and reached it at 7am on Saturday 8 May 2010. “When we all got to the top, we hugged each other and just started crying. I probably cried for about 30 minutes at the top. I’m not sure why. I was just overwhelmed and in awe of the most spectacular beauty of God’s creation – and of being a witness to it.

“How awesome, praying to God and thanking him for allowing me to make it to the top. What you feel and think up there is just so clear and wonderful.”

What was the most difficult part of the climb?

“Up! Every day was tough, okay! Every day! But summit night was surely the most torturous day. We started at 24:00 on Saturday morning and it was dark and icy cold and there was not a lot of air to breathe. Our pace was slow. It was the longest seven-and-a-half hours of walking in my life. The sun just didn’t want to rise over the horizon, but all of it disappeared the moment we got to the top.”

What stood out on the climb?

“Well, it’s quite obvious. The Uhuru Peak sign on top of the mountain! It is standing out above everything in the whole of Africa. Nothing can top that!”

What was she thinking 5895 meters above sea level?

“Legend-freakin-dary! Best reward ever! Definitely the most difficult thing I’ve ever done, but by far the most rewarding accomplishment ever achieved.”

Then the celebrations began, the blowing of the vuvuzela and kicking the “Kiliball” around the top of the highest mountain in Africa, host to the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

“To hear the vuvuzela echoing over the top of Africa was quite unique. The ball had messages from Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma patients on it.

“But there was a bit more than just kicking the ball around from Lionel! He threw it around and voila, it hopped down 200 – 300 meters into the crater (Kilimanjaro is a volcano). Luckily one of our very fit local guides, James, came to Kiliball’s rescue and found it two-and-a-half hours later.”

Hanekom also wrote a rap song about the experience, which they performed at the summit, where they spent between one and two hours rather than the usual 15 minutes.

Her message to those affected by cancer: “Don’t ever give it! Keep a positive mind and know that you will beat this thing. Don’t see your cancer as a battle or a struggle, think of it as a life experience, a journey. And when you’ve conquered it, say you’ve beaten cancer! Think positive, always.

“And then, all of you out there that have beaten cancer remember that you got a second chance to live, so live. Take on new challenges. Go and do things you would never think of doing.

“Jump out of aeroplanes, dive with great white sharks, drive through the whole of South Africa; go and watch a World Cup soccer game, and if you have a strong mind – go and conquer Mount Kilimanjaro too.

Write this all in your life experience book, just as cancer was a life experience. Never stop living!”

And the next challenge she intends to face?

“My marriage! Apparently it’s not just ‘perdekoop’. I got married three months ago and would like to set up a home where we can just enjoy each other and our surroundings. Then after that, probably taking on the challenge of babymaking and motherhood! Yippee!”

Ends / 1915 Words

CAPTION L-R: Robby Kojetin (Team Leader); Lionel Greenberg & Ilse-Mari Hanekom (Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma survivors)