

# Lamorinda Native Scales Myanmar's Highest Peak

By Cathy Dausman



From left, Mark Fisher, Po Pin, Eric Daft, Andy Tyson, Molly Loomis and Chris Nance celebrating the first ascent of Myanmar's Gamlang Razi Mountain. Photo courtesy Fisher Creative

Molly Loomis has traveled to places those in the western world usually don't go. Late last summer she became the lone woman in a group making the first ascent on Myanmar's Gamlang Razi Mountain. They spent more than a month in its conquest.

While Myanmar claims another peak, Hkakbo Razi, as Southeast Asia's highest, Loomis said new map data taken from the GPS readings they made atop Gamlang Razi proved otherwise. Their readings recorded Gamlang Razi's elevation at 19,238 feet.

Loomis recently shared slides of her journey at a private reception in Lafayette. The audience included school friends - Loomis is a 1995 graduate of Acalanes High School - their parents and neighbors. Loomis' adventure began with a 180-mile, two-week hike to reach the mountain's base camp. The mountaineers carted everything in themselves - local villages were too small to support their needs. They hired dozens of local porters, each of whom shouldered about 30 kilos (66 pounds) of supplies in baskets made of bamboo and rattan.

"We definitely were not moving 'light and fast,'" Loomis admitted. Her team walked an average of 15 miles daily in heat and tropical humidity, drinking four or five liters of water to stay hydrated. En route there were hardships - leech bites, sand flies and swarms of bees.

The leech bites "looked worse than they felt," she said, and the sand flies produced an awful skin rash. They crossed handmade rope bridges of uncertain weight limits. On a single day they once gained 8,000 feet in vertical elevation. But by acclimating carefully, the group avoided suffering major altitude sickness.

The trip offered beauty as well, in the form of spongy rhododendron forests and "stunning" butterflies. Arriving at base camp, elevation 15,500, they endured rain for 10 days straight.

"Things were pretty wet," Loomis said. Still, the group accomplished the unbelievable - a summit

on first attempt. Anticipating a break in the weather, the team rose at 3 a.m. The rain turned to snow, then white-out conditions as the expedition veered slightly off course; still they climbed the final 4,000 feet to the summit.

The weather was such that "we never saw the top of the mountain until we were coming down," Loomis said. On their return to civilization - the city of Yangon - the Myanmar government presented them with a congratulatory letter "for climbing the second highest" peak.

"Myanmar is big in the formality of celebrations," said Loomis, which might also explain why their group was formally recognized once before they even began their journey.

Loomis' lush photography gave the adventure the exotic feel of a National Geographic outing, but Loomis' mother, Liz Loomis, who attended the presentation, admits it is "hard to be a parent" of a child who climbs.

"You have to have a certain modern of faith," she said, recalling when "walking to the end of the driveway" was a major accomplishment for her daughter. That changed when she enrolled her then-teenager in Cal Adventures, a UC Berkeley outdoor program, and Loomis hiked from "one side of the Sierra near Devil's Postpile to Yosemite Valley."

Loomis took up outdoor adventures in earnest attending college in Colorado. "What's next?" an audience member inquired as her presentation ended.

"Nothing," she replied. "The record is just out there."

Loomis is now a writer in Teton Valley, Idaho, and works as a park ranger in the Grand Tetons during the summers. Her adventures and photography are documented online at www.mollyloomis.com.

At least two other climbers have roots in Lamorinda: Hans Florine, who shares the Speed Climb World Record for ascending The Nose of Yosemite's El Capitan; and Steve Wampler, the first person with cerebral palsy to climb El Capitan.

## MOFD Updates GIS Evacuation Maps

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MOFD was one of the first fire districts in Northern California to employ such technology, she said.

Hoover recalled planning "pretty lengthy" evacuation drills for Bollinger Canyon and Canyon. "Unfortunately, we didn't quite get there," she said, meaning the program was still in its infancy. (See related story on page D1.) Recent improvements now make GIS technology more accessible and certainly more affordable.

"High resolution ortho (aerial) photos used to cost thousands of dollars," Rein said. "Now many maps are available online, either free or inexpensively, through National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and U.S. Geological Survey websites."

Map analysis allows for better evacuation decisions to be made, with less risk of life for first responders, Rein said. GIS is "just a tool," he said; but Hoover called it a "wonderful" tool, and emphasized the need for

fire service responders "to have all the best possible info."

This summer, updated 8 by 12 foot GIS maps will adorn each MOFD fire station. Garcia and Rein will also provide map books to every MOFD fire engine, and oversee GIS information updates for Saint Mary's College.

Garcia will continue to work as a private contractor for MOFD through the current fiscal year; he is also negotiating with the Town of Moraga to perform similar updates on their GIS data. The project goal is to share information with "neighborhoods, emergency responders, cities and regional [entities]," Rein said.

"This area seems very good for sharing," Garcia said. And GIS data will become even more important as fire season approaches.

GIS is useful in operations, training and prevention applications, said Hoover. In a word, she calls it "amazing."



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