

# Conversation with: Mark Milewski

‘Whenever there is an opportunity, I jump at an adventure’

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**By Suzanne McLaughlin**  
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Last May, Mark Milewski, a lifelong Manchester resident, scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 25 in Manchester, and business teacher at Tunxis Community College in Farmington, summited Mount Everest. That leaves him with only two more of the Seven Summits to climb.

He has hiked the Appalachian Trail and the John Muir Trail in California, but said Denali in Alaska is the mountain he is most proud of climbing, calling it a mountaineer’s mountain.

Milewski, who also has climbed all 48 of the peaks in New Hampshire’s White Mountains and the 46 peaks of the Adirondacks, said that whenever there is an opportunity, he jumps at an adventure.

## **Q: What are some of the mountains you hiked as a child?**

A: Certainly Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire and Mount Tom in Holyoke, Massachusetts. I don’t know if I hiked Killington, Vermont, but I certainly skied it a lot. I grew up in a ski family so we skied a lot in Vermont. My parents were both skiers. I have a brother and sister who are all skiers. My parents were in a hiking club and they would take us along. We were outdoorsy. They were immigrants from Poland and their closest friends were Polish immigrants. They were in a hiking club with other Polish immigrants based in New Britain.

## **Q: Have you ever been to Poland?**

A: Yeah. The Tatra Mountains in Poland are gorgeous. They look like the Sierra Mountains of California. My parents got me into Scouts and that’s where a lot of my interest in hiking developed.

## **Q: You’ve hiked the entire Appalachian Trail?**

A: Yes. I was 27. That was 1997. I hiked with my good friend, Matt Tracy. We grew up in the same neighborhood in Manchester and we’re both Eagle Scouts in Troop 25. It was a great pairing. He’s very social so he made sure we had fun on the trail, and I’m very organized so I made sure we got to where we needed to go. The trail is more than 2,000 miles. It took six months. Whenever there is an opportunity, I jump at an adventure.

## **Q: You did the John Muir Trail in California?**

A: If there is one trail that anyone could hike, I would recommend the John Muir Trail. It’s in the high Sierras of California and every step is a beautiful view. Here in the Northeast we hike all day to pop out of the trees for that beautiful view on the summit. You would not be disappointed on the John Muir Trail. It’s so vast, and the views are spectacular.

## **Q: You went to Colorado’s Outward Bound School?**

A: I did. It was a matter of my interest growing in the outdoors with the Scouts and I wanted to continue and deepen that experience. The summer of my sophomore year in high school I took my first Outward Bound course. It was a 23-day mountaineering course in Colorado and when I graduated from Syracuse University I took an even more intense course, an 83-day, multi-element wilderness leadership semester. That was incredible and that helped me learn so many skills in cold mountains, in canyons, and in deserts.

## **Q: You also did 46 Adirondack peaks? Some people spend their whole life doing that.**

A: Yeah. That took me six years or so. I love the Adirondacks. Before that, I hiked the 48 4,000-footers in New Hampshire and I didn’t believe there could be any mountains more difficult than those in the White Mountains. They are very rugged and very steep. The Adirondacks are just as difficult as the Whites. They are wet, mucky, steep, and beautiful. In the Adirondacks, it’s the way life should be, it’s going back in time, it’s quieter, there is less technology. You’re completely in the wilderness there.

**Q: Did your experience in the Boy Scouts have a lot to do with your love of climbing?**

A: For sure. They have a great outdoors program and there are leaders in Troop 25 who were my mentors. They were climbing in the White Mountains, so that's probably where the idea popped in my head to also do these mountains. They were running a solid back packing program so we really learned great skills there. My mentors are still involved with the troop today, although I've largely taken the reins from them, and now that I'm a scoutmaster I've passed this on to the next generation. The huge experience in Troop 25 is the week that you spend backpacking on the Appalachian Trail after freshman year in high school. You hike a 55-mile section in New Hampshire. The hike starts by summiting a mountain. It's a pretty brutal start to the hike, but if you can do that, you can do the rest. It's pretty inspirational.

**Q: Why did you decide to stay with the troop?**

A: I never left. I went through the seven-year program that goes through your senior year of high school. You're an assistant scoutmaster, you're in charge of the patrol. They called me back and asked me to help out at summer camp. They asked me to fill the program director's shoes as a college student and I really enjoyed it. It's a two-week overnight camp in New Hampshire. There are 65 boys there. You're on a staff with 30 or 40 other adults so there is a lot of help and support. For me it's almost more fun being a leader. I was a nervous, anxious Scout and young person, and I'm delighted to be able to help Scouts go through the program and learn the things I did, I really enjoy providing a great program for them. We're all volunteers.

**Q: What are the Seven Summits? You've climbed all but two?**

A: The highest mountain on each continent. It's a fun thing to do. I've gotten better at enjoying the journey in life, but I do like having goals. It keeps me going. I started climbing the Seven Summits and somehow I've gotten all but two, Antarctica and Oceania, under my belt.

**Q: What is the big challenge in high altitude climbing?**

A: Health, I would say. Not succumbing to altitude sickness. That is partly a matter of luck. Altitude sickness can attack anyone. At a low level there is dizziness and nausea. If it becomes more severe, it could be pulmonary edema or cerebral edema, which is fluid in your lungs or fluid in your brain. Those are life-threatening conditions. Those conditions can just hit.

**Q: Is that why people go with these guides?**

A: Right. I've gone on all of these mountains with the world's best, high altitude guide companies.

**Q: Can you give me a favorite mountain climbing experience?**

A: I guess every summit. Getting to the end of the Appalachian Trail, which is a six-month hike, was an enormously deep feeling of gratitude and achievement. To think that nothing stopped me in all of that time. A sprained ankle, running out of money, someone getting sick at home so you'd have to get off the trail, who knows. None of that happened, but so many things could have happened. To have made it to the end, that was just, just really great. So many deep friendships were made on that trip. On Denali, that's probably the summit I'm most proud of. Denali is a mountaineer's mountain. I carried a 60-pound backpack and I had an 80-pound sled; it's a lot of hard work. You're building your campsites, you're cutting snow for walls so the high winds don't blow your tents down. That's a mountain that I'm very, very proud of.

**Q: Why is Kilimanjaro considered a luxury climb?**

A: You are trekking, essentially. You have a rucksack. It's not very heavy. There were three clients on that trip. We had two guides, three clients, and 19 porters.

**Q: So they carry your stuff?**

A: Yeah. They put up your tent, they take down your tent. You walk around the corner and there is a table set up and lunch is ready. It's British expedition-style mountain climbing. It's very pleasant. The trick there is the altitude again. The people who go too fast, they don't make it. I took it easy, went with the best, got treated the best, and had a wonderful, wonderful experience. But all my friends were like "That's mountain climbing, seriously?"

**Q: How did you come to climb Mount Everest? Was this just one of your goals?**

A: It was cumulative. After I climbed others of the Seven Summits, it occurred to me that I had developed the skills to climb Mount Everest competently. I didn't want to be one of these rich, but incompetent people on Mount Everest. You read about these folks who can afford to get short-rope up the mountain but in fact they're a danger. They don't really know what they're doing. They're looking for a trophy. I wanted to have the skills to be a competent member of the team and it occurred to me that I had, after all my experiences developed those skills.

**Q: How many people were in your group?**

A: It was a seven person team. We had two guides, but we ended up with three. Another guide attached to our group. It was wonderful because she was amazing.

**Q: Did everyone in the group make it?**

A: Four out of the original seven made it.

**Q: Is it the altitude that gets people?**

A: I think so. Two out of three developed pulmonary edema and had to be evacuated by helicopter. And one had a really bad cough that weakened him. We were going the right pace. The guides were interested in assessing your ability. If you were slow on a certain day they would provide you with a Sherpa to stay with you even though you might be behind the group. They wanted to know your capability. They would let the dominoes fall. When you get toward the summit, they wanted to make sure that everyone was competent and able and not a danger to the group.

**Q: How long did this take?**

A: It took 10 days just to get to base camp. Base camp itself is 17,000 feet. It's an accomplishment just to get to base camp. And then we spent 40 days after that trying to climb the mountain. It's not like you just go up and down. There's a lot of up and down before you actually go up for the final time. You are almost always on a fixed line, screwed into the mountain with an ice screw and attached to the mountain. You're always hoping the ice screw holds of course. You have a rock climbing harness on. You're clipped in to that fixed line. You have to clip and unclip around the anchors to go on. If you need to pass someone, you need to unclip completely to get around these puffy people.

**Q: What are you wearing at that point?**

A: One of the hardest parts is trying to figure out what to wear. With the sun blazing down on you, it can be quite warm. You wear layers. You have to carry what you're not wearing in your pack. It could be 40 degrees with the sun shining in the morning, and that seems really, really warm. By noon it's already getting cloudy and it might be snowing. By dinner time it's probably zero. You're putting on puffy, down clothing to stay warm.

**Q: At a point, when you're climbing, there's no more plant life, animal life, insect life?**

A: On the trek in you reach that point where you leave the vegetation zone. It's quite barren. You are looking at rock and ice. There's nothing green. There's a point on the trek where our lead guide said, "Say goodbye to the trees. This is the last time you're going to see them until we come back down."

**Q: When you're climbing, is there a danger of snow avalanches and high winds?**

A: There's a huge danger. The last couple of years on Everest were not good ones. In 2014, 16 Sherpa died in an avalanche right above base camp. That ended that climbing season. Last year there was the huge earthquake in Nepal that shook the Everest region. It shook the snow off the mountain next to Everest, which caused an avalanche to blow through base camp, killing 18 people. That was the biggest tragedy on Everest thus far. That ended the season. Two of the climbers on the team this year were on the mountain last year when that happened. They had to be evacuated by helicopter.

**Q: You have a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees?**

A: Master's in history, and a master's in business administration. I also had a year-long teacher preparation course at Yale. It was a wonderful learning experience.

**Q: Did you end up teaching high school?**

A: I did. I taught social studies in Meriden for about three years. I resigned my teaching position to climb Denali. Then the financial crisis came. I thought I would likely return, but after the financial crisis the teaching positions dried up. The opportunity at Tunxis Community College in Farmington opened up and that has turned out to be wonderful.

**Q: You really have used all those master's degrees?**

A: Yes. It goes to show there is value in cross training and diversifying. I used my master's in history, but I had to fall back on my master's in business. History is my first passion. I also became interested in the business world. I worked at Eastern Mountain Sport for a while after getting my MBA, it aligned with my interests. Selling is a lot like teaching. We always looked after the best interest of the customer at Eastern Mountain Sport and helped to educate them about their new sport. It was a great job at a very customer-focused company. I worked so many hours, though, that I spent too little time outdoors. I went into teaching because I was looking for more balance. Teaching affords me that balance. I was given a leave of absence to climb Mount Everest last spring. The college fully supported me. I gave two presentations to the college. I enjoy sharing my experiences with my students. There are parallels between high altitude climbing and business success.

**Q: What lessons do you try to teach your students?**

A: I am a huge believer in following your passion, but aligning it with something that allows you to pay the bills. I tell my students it's wonderful to be passionate, but make sure you think creatively about how you can make a living. You don't want to wake up 20 years later and say, I have only one shot at life; what have I just done with the last 20 years.