

WORDS **JULIE McCROSSIN**  
PHOTOGRAPHY **RUSTY WHITE**

**I**n June, Diane Westaway, 48, the founder of the women-only adventure fitness group Wild Women on Top, plans to set out with a group of four to climb the highest mountain in North America, Mt McKinley, also known as Denali. This 6194m peak is in the Denali National Park in Alaska. It is known for its extreme cold and is often said to be tougher than Mt Everest because of the physical work involved. There are no Sherpas or pack animals to carry your gear in Alaska.

If Westaway makes it to the top of Denali, it will be her fifth successful summit in her quest to climb the famous Seven Summits. These are the seven highest peaks on the seven continents. It is the Holy Grail of every climber to achieve this elusive goal.

Her plan is to climb Mt Everest (8848m) in 2011 and Mt Vinson (4892m) in Antarctica in 2013. She has already conquered our own Mt Kosciusko (2228m) as well as Mt Kilimanjaro (4600m) in Tanzania in 2005, Mt Elbrus (5642m) in Russia in 2006 and Mt Aconcagua (6962m) in Argentina in 2008.

# Mountain high

For this woman, and several others, climbing the world's highest peaks is the ultimate challenge



On each occasion, she climbed with an all-women group and made it to the summit.

These achievements are remarkable, not only because all-female climbing teams are highly unusual, but also because all of the women were mothers, generally with very limited prior experience of advanced trekking or climbing.

One of the women who joined Westaway on Mt Kosciusko, Mt Elbrus and Mt Kilimanjaro was Meerie Barkle, 51, a full-time mother from the northern beaches of Sydney. Barkle has 10 children ranging in age from eight to 28 and three grandchildren. "Compared to raising 10 kids, nothing is scary," Barkle says of her experiences.

Another team member on those three mountains was Eileen Robbers, 57, from the Sutherland Shire in NSW, who says that before becoming involved with Westaway and her group, "I had never walked in the bush or slept in a tent and sleeping bag for fear of snakes and other animals."

These two women exemplify the motto of Westaway's Wild Women: "Ordinary women doing extraordinary things." Most of the group's members simply hike in the bushland around Sydney and go on longer treks on weekends. However, five years ago, while drinking champagne, a group of 15 came up with the idea of climbing the Seven Summits. Four of the original 15 are still involved and others have joined along the way. Westaway hopes that 30 women will come along to Everest base camp in 2011 and support the smaller group that will try for the summit.

I met Diane Westaway on a very chilly morning on the edge of a sandstone cliff overlooking Sydney Harbour, with a clear view of the Sydney Opera House across the water. We met at 7am at Westaway's request. It had to be early, she'd said, because it was the day of her husband's 50th birthday and she had a lot of cooking and organising to do for a big Rocky Horror party that night. (Diane is married to actor Simon Westaway, best known for his tough-man roles in crime dramas, including *Underbelly*, *Phoenix* and *Janus*.) That she had agreed to meet me on such a busy day is typical of the energetic way Westaway juggles her fitness work and the care of her family, including her children, Jackson, 17, Bella, 15 and Reuben, 7.

I'm surprised to see she's dressed in a singlet top and tiny shorts on such a cold morning. There is a cool breeze blowing as we talk and I offer her a coat from my car. She refuses it. It turns out she is training her body to cope with the cold in preparation for

climbing Denali in Alaska, which is right up near the Arctic Circle.

She says her two biggest challenges on Denali will be the cold and "managing the personalities of the group at the same time as managing the challenges of the wilderness". But is it the cold that will be toughest of all? "I have a problem with circulation in my hands and feet," she explains calmly, "so when everybody else is OK, I have numb fingers and toes. One of my goals on Denali is not to come home missing any fingers or toes." She is laughing as she says this, but she's not joking.

Westaway had a frostbite scare on Mt Aconcagua last year, when her hands and feet got very cold and climbers from another group came down the mountain reporting that others ahead were getting frostbite. One of the Wild Women, Annie Doyle, helped Westaway put foot warmers in her boots and things turned out OK. But when Westaway

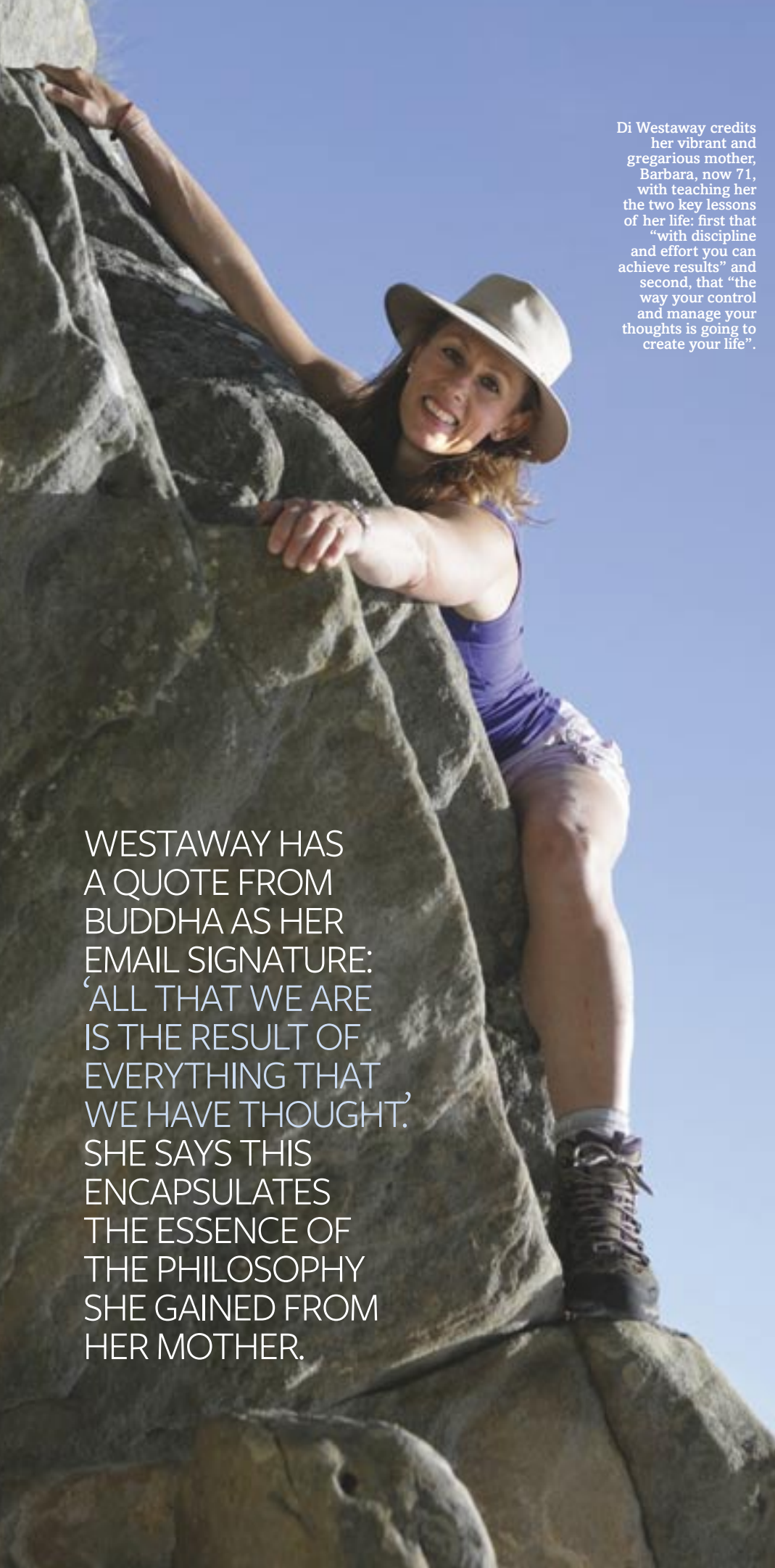
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talks about the cold, her voice takes on a serious tone.

When it comes to the other key challenge, managing group dynamics, Westaway is well-regarded for her skills. The first Australian woman to complete the Seven Summits, Brigitte Muir OAM has described Westaway's approach to leadership as "steel tempered by a warm heart, which reaches out when needed". Muir says Westaway "relentlessly pushes her charges to take them to new heights ... and creates not only individual strength but also a deep team spirit in the groups she trains".

Westaway tells me she has learnt two key lessons about leadership on the mountains: "the need to take the time and make the opportunities for regular communication about what is happening, why it's happening and how it's going to impact on people" and

Di Westaway, 48, who founded a women-only adventure fitness group Wild Women on Top, training to take on the highest mountain in North America, Mt McKinley, in Alaska in June 2009. Left from top: The team led by Brigitte Muir climbing Mt Elbrus, Russia 2006; on the summit in Russia from back left Amanda Jones, Meerie Barkle, Annie Doyle and, front, Di Westaway.



Di Westaway credits her vibrant and gregarious mother, Barbara, now 71, with teaching her the two key lessons of her life: first that “with discipline and effort you can achieve results” and second, that “the way your control and manage your thoughts is going to create your life”.

WESTAWAY HAS A QUOTE FROM BUDDHA AS HER EMAIL SIGNATURE: ‘ALL THAT WE ARE IS THE RESULT OF EVERYTHING THAT WE HAVE THOUGHT.’ SHE SAYS THIS ENCAPSULATES THE ESSENCE OF THE PHILOSOPHY SHE GAINED FROM HER MOTHER.

“your job as a leader is to lead from behind and to empower each person to find their true skills and true talents”. Working with women is so fulfilling, she says, that, for her, mountaineering is not just about getting to the summit. “Supporting other women to have the opportunity to climb mountains is equally important to me,” she says.

Then she laughs and admits, “It is extremely rewarding to climb to the top of something. No matter how small or big it is, I like to get to get to the top of it!”

This tension between the group and the individual experience is a theme that recurs throughout our conversation. It seems that when a group of people set out to climb a mountain, there is an inbuilt tension between the intense group experience, which is fundamental to camaraderie, mutual support and motivation, and the reality that at certain points everyone is fundamentally alone. This tension is crystallised on the day the climbers try to summit. At that moment, you either make it or you don’t.

Westaway has climbed with both men and women and she prefers all-women groups, she says, “because you actually have greater success because everybody works together to help everybody else”. Even so, it is often a tough time on summit day because it’s not always possible for everyone to stay together and make it to the top.

“Up until summit day, we all walk together and we wait for slow people,” Westaway explains. “We help each other with what we carry. But on summit day it is distilled down to the individual. On every summit day I’ve done, I’ve been faced with a choice: do I summit or do I help somebody else to turn around and stop? Hopefully, you’ve got enough resources with your guides that no one has to make that decision to turn back to help someone else.”

Last year, on Mt Aconcagua, four women, including Westaway, made it to the summit at 6962m and three didn’t make it. The last 300 vertical metres of rock scrambling were especially tricky. One woman started vomiting and had to turn back with the support of a guide. Each woman on that climb was wearing underpants inscribed “Never, never, never give up”. But under the brutal pressure of the climb, that simply wasn’t possible for everyone to fulfil.

“It takes more courage to turn around sometimes than to keep going,” she says. It can be necessary for your own safety or the safety of others. Back in 2000, on an earlier climb in a mixed group of men and women,



With husband  
Simon in 2006  
with children  
Ruben; Jackson  
and Bella.

Westaway turned back on Aconcagua ... "because I needed to help someone else". In a group like Westaway's, where everyone is a mother, a willingness to turn back to ensure survival is especially important. Westaway says, "I am prepared to turn around if required." She continues: "This is primarily about my responsibilities as a mother, but your instinct to survive is really strong."

Westaway says everyone has the experience of thinking, "I could die here", but the group faced this issue directly in 2006. The highly experienced Australian mountaineer Sue Fear was training Westaway's group in preparation for guiding them on their climb of Mt Elbrus. Fear had just one more climb to do herself, on Mt Manaslu in Nepal, before heading out with the Wild Women. But Fear fell into a crevasse on that trip and never came back. She was just 43.

"Her death had a huge impact on us," Westaway says. "Some of our husbands and kids got very anxious. We had to explain that the mountain we were climbing was a trekking peak, not a technical mountain. It wasn't remote like Manaslu and we were going with a whole team and guides." Westaway and her team completed the climb of Mt Elbrus with a new guide later that year.

Mental toughness, discipline and courage are clearly essential for Westaway and there were signs of these strengths in her earlier years and family history. She grew up in Canberra with one sister, Suzanne, 18 months older, who still lives in Canberra and works conserving Japanese art at the National Gallery. Westaway won the Australian Gymnastics Championships at 16. Her Czech refugee father, Sylvester

Knedlhans, built her a beam in their Canberra backyard. When I ask where she found the motivation to train so hard, she simply says, "Winning was very important to me at that age. I had to be first." Indeed, when she couldn't find the trainers she wanted locally, she travelled at 15 to live in the United States and attend the Walnut Hill School for Performing Arts.

After school, she gained qualifications in physical education and trained girls in gymnastics at the Methodist Ladies College in Melbourne. Later, she returned to university and studied journalism. She worked as a producer for John Laws.

Westaway credits her vibrant and gregarious mother, Barbara, now 71, a retired retail manager and a committed Christian Scientist, with teaching her the two key lessons of her life: first that "with discipline and effort you can achieve results" and, second, that "the way you control and manage your thoughts is going to create your life". Westaway has a quote from Buddha as her email signature: "All that we are is the result of everything that we have thought."

Her late father was 22 years older than his wife. Westaway remembers him as a loving but remote and highly protective father. When she was young, she tells me, her dad was a worrier. "If he was here now," she says, pointing to the edge of the cliff near where we are sitting, "he would be pulling us back from the edge." Back in 2000, he was very concerned about her first trip to Mt Aconcagua. "He had spent time working for the Snowy Mountains Scheme, when he first came to Australia," Westaway explains. "He knew what weather could do in the mountains and he was very worried for us.

My mum is much more of a risk taker."

As the morning begins to warm up beside Sydney Harbour it's time for our conversation to end and for Westaway to rush off and get ready for her husband's party. We've spent a lot of time talking about the challenges of mountain climbing, yet when I ask Westaway to nominate her single greatest achievement and her most important future goal, without hesitation she says the same answer to both questions: "Staying married."

Simon and Diane have known each other since high school. She describes him as "a good and kind person. And he's loving and a very involved father."

The challenge in their marriage, she says, is: "I am the disciplined and focused one who could work 24/7 and Simon's lifestyle is completely different. He's the party boy. He shows me how to relax."

Westaway says that being married to an actor is "very challenging" because "your

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life partner changes all the time and, when an actor is getting into character, they start to change in subtle but insidious ways". She cites an example when Simon played a brutal man in the 2002 Australian film depicting rural life, *Australian Rules*. She tells me that when she saw the film, "I was quite shocked at the emotion, the aggression, the force of the character."

But, she says, "It is important to stick with what you've got if you've got a good person and I think I've got a good person." As we part, she excitedly discusses her plans for the 50th birthday party she has organised for her husband. It occurs to me that she brings as much energy and passion to staying married as she does to climbing mountains. Simon is a very lucky guy. ♦

*Julie McCrossin has become a Wild Woman and plans to climb Mt Kosciusko and Mt Townsend in 2009.*