



## Stacy Allison Oral History Interview, July 21, 2014

### **Title**

“From Oregon State to the Rooftop of the World”

### **Date**

July 21, 2014

### **Location**

Allison residence, Portland, Oregon.

### **Summary**

In the interview, Allison describes her upbringing on a farm near Woodburn, Oregon and her decision to attend OSU as a Nutrition major. From there she recounts the introduction to climbing that she received during her year as an Oregon State undergraduate, her exposure to the OSU Mountain Club, and her ultimate decision to leave school in favor of pursuing her passion for mountaineering.

The bulk of the session focuses on Allison's career in the mountains. She recalls her early climbing experiences and the development of her skills, then shares her memories of specific expeditions, including her experiences climbing Denali and Ama Dablam. In this, she also notes her impressions of the general advancement of women in climbing during the 1980s, including the manufacture of climbing gear designed specifically for women.

Allison then discusses her two expeditions to Mount Everest. She briefly describes her 1987 attempt, commenting on the fierce storm that led her climbing team to take refuge in a snow cave for five days and ultimately turn back short of the summit. She likewise recounts her second attempt, in September 1988, including details of her climb and the exhilaration that she felt upon reaching the summit, in the process becoming the first U.S. woman to arrive at the world's highest point.

The remainder of the interview is devoted primarily to Allison's career outside of mountain climbing, including her work as a motivational speaker and general contractor, and her affiliation with Climb for Clean Air/Reach the Summit. The session concludes with Allison's thoughts on leadership, her sense of the impact that OSU made on her life, and her advice for students of today.

### **Interviewee**

Stacy Allison

### **Interviewer**

Janice Dilg

### **Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/allison/>

## Transcript

**Janice Dilg:** So today is July 21st, 2014, and my name is Janice Dilg. I am with the Oregon State University Oral History Project, and I am here today with Stacy Allison in her home in Portland, Oregon. And we're going to talk about her connections with OSU and her life since then. Good morning.

**Stacy Allison:** Good morning. I'm glad to be here.

**JD:** Great! Glad to have you. So why don't we kind of begin at the beginning, and have you talk a little about where you were born, and a little bit about your family, and growing up in Oregon?

**SA:** Well, I was actually born in Pocatello, Idaho, because my father was going to school there at the time, and moved back to Oregon, which both of my parents grew up in Oregon. And I lived in Woodburn pretty much all of my young life, until I graduated from high school in 1976, and then went to Oregon State.

**JD:** So talk a little about growing up in Woodburn. What was it like back in the '60s and '70s when you were growing up there?

**SA:** Well, it was a farming community. At one time Woodburn was known as the berry capital of the world, and we, in the summertime we picked berries, which is what all the kids did. We had buses come by and we would all get on. It was very social; we were with all of our friends. And it was just a small farming town. And I think when you grow up in a small town where you are working, I think the values are such that you learn to understand and value work.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And what all that means to getting ahead, becoming successful in your adult life. You learn about responsibility and things like that, which quite frankly, my children don't have now, [laughs] living in the city of Portland, and not being able to work as they were growing up.

**JD:** Mm-hm. Definitely a change. And in addition to working, what were some of your fun activities, or your interests or hobbies as you were growing up?

**SA:** Well, there were five of us. I have three sisters and one brother, and we all swam. We were on the swimming team growing up, so we swam competitively when we were children. We played the piano. All of us had to play the piano, so we took lessons. We skied every weekend at Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood. And we also danced. I took tap dancing lessons for many, many years.

**JD:** [Laughs]

**SA:** [Laughs] We also did a lot of outdoor things. For example, my father would take us fishing. When we were quite young, we went ice fishing. We would fish in the summertime on the weekends, so that was a lot of fun. And playing, when we were quite young we used to play in the trees that surrounded our house. And we would actually play house in the trees, and we would—the leaves would be our money, so we would do a lot of exchanging of money for goods, and things like that.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** So it was a fairly carefree lifestyle back then. We really didn't have many worries.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** However, growing up in a farming town, I knew very early on that I would never marry a farmer. [Laughs] I didn't want to work that hard, 24-7.

**JD:** [Laughs] And I know you graduated from Woodburn High School. Were there specific interests you had at school, and things that you thought you would like to study as you went forward to college? It sounds like college was an expectation in your family?

**SA:** College was an expectation in our family, no ifs, ands, or buts. My father left my mother when we were in middle school, when I was in middle school, and it was—my mother always said, especially to us girls, that you have to have a college education. I don't care what you do with it; you have got to have a college education. You've got to be able to depend on yourself. You cannot depend on anyone else but yourself. And so that was ingrained in my head. And in high school I was interested in the sciences, in biology. I thought that I wanted to be a nutritionist when I went down to Oregon State originally. However [0:04:58], what I soon learned upon enrolling is that if you wanted to study nutrition, they put you in the economics—not economics—

**JD:** The Home—

**SA:** Home Ec, excuse me. Economics would have been really interesting.

**JD:** [Laughs]

**SA:** Anyway, they put me in the Home Ec Department, and I was not interested in Home Ec; that's not what I wanted to do. So after a couple of terms, I got out of that, and I re-entered into the Biology Department.

**JD:** Mm-hm. So talk a little about how you came to choose OSU, and what it was like to arrive on campus there in was it 1976?

**SA:** 1976. My mother went to Oregon State, and it just seemed like the logical place for me to go. My older sister attended Oregon State for one year before she transferred to a different college. It was close. I wanted to be close to my mom.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** There was really no other thought to it than that.

**JD:** Mm-hm. And so what was OSU like then? What was the campus like, campus life? What do you remember?

**SA:** I was in a dorm, as all freshmen are. I met some wonderful people, who I am still very, very good friends with. Ellen Lees and Lynn Bornholdt were—I met outdoor people who had similar interests to mine.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** Living in the dorms, I met people who were climbers, and that's how I actually got involved in climbing. And we used to do fun things like climb the fir trees on campus, which was illegal, and my first rappel actually was in the middle of the night, down a fir tree.

**JD:** [Laughs]

**SA:** So, I don't know. [Laughs]

**JD:** Yeah, that's great. And so, was kind of outdoor activities the thing that you really liked to do the most when you had time away from classes and studies, or what were the other things that you were doing? You're right; college is a time to meet new people and explore new things.

**SA:** When I wasn't in class, I ran back then, so I would run. I no longer played the piano when I went to college. It was not easily accessible to me. I had some interesting friends back then, people who were in some of my classes, who I learned a lot from.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** I don't know what I'm saying. [Laughs] I mean, there's not a whole lot to say. [Laughs]

**JD:** Sure.

**SA:** Basically, you're studying.

**JD:** Sure.

**SA:** I didn't have a lot of free time!

**JD:** That is the main reason one goes to college.

**SA:** And I did that. I actually worked when I was there. I worked in one of the greenhouses where they were doing experiments on crops. So I did have a—you know, I worked a couple of hours a week in the greenhouses.

**JD:** Sure. Sure. It's all good. And so I know one of the things that you mentioned when we spoke before our interview was a lecture that you heard by kind of an OSU icon, Willi Unsoeld.

**SA:** Mm-hm.

**JD:** Talk a little about what were the circumstances in which you heard him, and what you gleaned from his—?

**SA:** Well, I don't remember what Willi Unsoeld actually said.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** But he was incredibly charismatic. It was through the outdoor program that he came to speak, and I had never seen anyone who was so charismatic. And whatever he said must have resonated with me somehow, and that's all I can tell you.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** But he was amazing. And I don't even know what he said. [Laughs] I don't know what he talked about. He must have talked about climbing Everest and being in the outdoors, and what that meant to him. I do remember that he was quite philosophical about what the outdoors, what climbing meant to him, but I could not tell you what he said.

**JD:** But clearly made an impression?

**SA:** It made an impression.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And at that time I had just started climbing. [0:10:00] And how that came about is someone in my dorm—he was the RA—put a notice on the board that he was going down to Zion National Park over spring break, and he wanted people to share gas money with him. So a friend, Evelyn Lees, and I, decided that would be great fun to go down there. And when we arrived, Curt—his name was Curt Hare. He talks a little about climbing, the very basics, and almost immediately that was when I knew that this was what I was meant to do.

**JD:** And can you talk a little about what the basics are?

**SA:** Well, we wore harnesses; we used ropes. So he taught us the very basics of putting a harness on, for example, and how to do that safely. He taught us how to tie some very basic knots, like a figure eight knot, that you use when you climb. He taught us the basics of belaying, where one person—the rope is attached to the climbing, the lead climbing person, the belayer lets out the rope, and then if that person going up should fall, you need to be able to stop that person from falling. So things like that, and he was very patient with us, and we learned a lot down there. And actually our one week of spring break turned into two weeks. Evelyn and I spent an extra week hiking, and then we hitchhiked back to Oregon.

**JD:** So clearly, you were taken?

**SA:** Yes. And both of us climb today. I mean, we're out there doing things.

**JD:** Mm-hm, mm-hm. And so, I know at some point you had—you were talking about the Outdoor Program, which I'm guessing the OSU Mountain Club was part of? That there's all of this gear, and that was a place where you could go access gear to go on trips.

**SA:** Yes, and I was always rather intimidated, so I didn't go into the Outdoor, the club, very often. Because I'm intimidated by that kind of stuff. [Laughs] But I had friends who were very much involved in the Outdoor Program, and we used to go in there and rent camping gear, for example, stoves, pots and pans, and things like that. We rented—for my first alpine climb, we rented crampons, and boots, and ice axes, and that type of thing.

**JD:** Mm-hm. And where was that located on campus at that time?

**SA:** I don't know.

**JD:** Okay.

**SA:** It was a Quonset hut. Is it still a Quonset hut?

**JD:** I don't know.

**SA:** I don't know either.

**JD:** I'll find out. [Laughs]

**SA:** [Laughs] You're asking—that's a long time ago.

**JD:** I know, I know. I realize that. [Laughs]

**SA:** So I don't know where it is!

**JD:** And so, you were regularly going out on weekends, and breaks?

**SA:** I wouldn't say regularly, but when we could get away, and we used to go cross-country skiing. But yes, when my group of friends and I had time, we would leave campus and do outdoor activities.

**JD:** Mm-hm, mm-hm. And then at some point your interest in climbing overtook your interest in learning about nutrition, or studies?

**SA:** [Laughs] I made the decision in my head, and I was very afraid to tell my mother that I was not going back to school, and rightly so. When I finally told her in the fall that I indeed was not going back to school, she was not happy. But it was the right thing for me. And we talked a little bit about growing up. One of the things that my parents, both of them, instilled in all of us, was you've got to take risks. You've got to follow your heart. It's okay to try new and different things, and it's okay to fail, as long as you reflect back on that failure and learn from it.

The one thing that they also instilled in us is that once you start something [0:15:01], you have to take it to completion. Now, I'm not necessarily talking about starting college, but I could not have dropped out of Oregon State during that first year, because I had to take that first year to completion before I could actually say, "Okay, I'm not going back." But because they taught us to take risks, I felt in my heart, in my head, that this was the right thing for me to do, regardless of what my mother thought of it. [Laughs] And to this day, it was indeed the correct thing.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And so I started climbing in earnest. I worked odd jobs here and there just to save up enough money to go climbing.

**JD:** Mm-hm. And talk about some of your first experiences, and clearly, they became higher and taller mountains, and more complex.

**SA:** Right. So I started out rock climbing, and that summer I continued to rock climb over at Smith Rock in central Oregon.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** That winter, the year that I did not go back to school, that winter I did my first alpine climb, which was Mount Washington, right on Santiam Pass. We skied into the mountain, climbed in the winter blizzard conditions, and it was so cold that when your hands would warm up, you would just—I was in so much pain that I just started crying. Couldn't see anything. Had I been able to see something I would have probably been—I might have not done it. [Laughs] Because I couldn't see anything, I couldn't tell how far above the ground we were, and kind of this crazy ice climbing we were doing.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** Made it to the top, rappelled down, and I think what I learned from that climb upon we were skiing out, I was so exhausted and I knew that if I fell over, I might not be able to get up. But what I realized is I have the capacity to push myself far beyond what I ever thought I was capable of doing physically, and that it was a mental thing. I was exhausted, but mentally I'd go on, forward, skiing, skiing, skiing, to get to the car.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And that was a totally new experience for me.

**JD:** And have you ever been able to kind of figure out sort of where that mental strength came from, or how you have it, and maybe some of your other climbing companions said, "Well that was great, but once was enough and I'm not going to keep doing that."

**SA:** That's a very good question. I don't know where that kind of strength comes from. I think part of that strength comes from doing something that touches my heart and my soul at a really deep level, and that's what climbing is to me. It's my true passion, and it touches me in a place where nothing else in this world touches. When I'm climbing, I know that I'm doing exactly what I should be doing at that moment. And I think when you are doing something that touches you, you find that inner strength. And I've seen people—and it's not just a physical pushing yourself beyond what you think you're capable of doing, but I think once you find your passion in one area, it can transfer over to other aspects of your life. Want me to tell you what I think about passion? [Laughs]

**JD:** Sure.

**SA:** Sorry!

**JD:** And you talked a little about learning the basics of rock climbing.

**SA:** Mm-hm.

**JD:** You know, clearly there had to be teachers, and mentors, who were helping you develop a larger and broader set of skills in order to continue to do these things.

**SA:** Right. So I did a lot of my early climbing with Curt Hare and Chris Mannix, and both of them were at Oregon State, and had been climbing for probably ten years each. So they knew how to rock climb. [0:20:01] They knew how to ice climb. They knew how to snow climb. Roger Robinson, who was also at Oregon State, is now the chief, one of the—I think he's the chief ranger for Denali National Park now. And those guys took us, Evelyn and I, under their wings, and taught us a tremendous amount. They actually pushed us to do things we probably shouldn't have been doing at the time, but because they did that we learned very quickly.

**JD:** Mm-hm, mm-hm.

**SA:** As a matter of fact, I went to Alaska my first time with Chris Mannix and another climber, and climbed a peak that I had no business being on, and broke down in tears. And once we were finished climbing, I had time to reflect on that, and I knew exactly what I needed to do in order to climb big mountains. I knew what I had to do skill-wise, physically, to get in shape for those kinds of mountains, and that was all because of that horrible experience. [Laughs]

**JD:** [Laughs] Well then, as you said, the reflection turned out to be very useful as you set your goals.

**SA:** Mm-hm.

**JD:** What were some of the things that you figured out you needed to do in order to climb high mountains?

**SA:** Well, first of all, I needed to get in shape. I needed to practice the skills, my rock climbing skills, my ice climbing skills, my snow skills, just walking in snow, being able to pace myself so that I would not exhaust myself. And just the experience of being in the mountains, I had to do more climbing. Experience—you cannot substitute experience for anything.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And physically, I just needed to get myself in shape. And the best thing for getting in shape for climbing is climbing. However, I also run, I whitewater kayak, I mountain bike, and those are all really good things, but you have to practice the art. It's like anything you do. If you don't practice, you don't become good at it. And I also knew, again, that I wanted to climb big mountains. That was my place.

**JD:** Mm-hm. And so the climbing community, probably even still today, is fairly small. You start to get to know other people.

**SA:** Mm-hm.

**JD:** How does one get involved in an expedition that's kind of going up to the next level, the next 10,000 feet, or 24,000-foot mountain?

**SA:** Well, Curt and I, a year after I was in Alaska the first time, a year later, after climbing many peaks down here in the States and up in Canada, we decided to go climb Denali. And before we went to Denali we actually tried another peak in the area, and that was strictly rock climbing. We did not make it to the summit, but we attempted. Then we flew to Denali, climbed one of the hardest routes on the mountain, the Cassin Ridge, and we only prepared for six days, had enough food for six days. It took us eleven days, because we were hit by two big storms where we had to hunker down and quit climbing. But when we got to the top, I remember sitting there thinking to myself, "Gosh, if I can climb Denali, then why not Everest?" And quite frankly, I was so embarrassed by my thoughts; I turned to look at Curt just to make sure he wasn't reading my thoughts.

**JD:** [Laughs]

**SA:** And it's interesting how sometimes we do that. It's like, "Oh my gosh, what would he think of me if he knew I was thinking, 'Maybe I can climb Everest?'" And so often, I think we do that. We're so concerned with what other people think of us that we don't pursue our goals or our dreams. Well, we came off of Denali, and I had met in my rock climbing—oh, I don't know. A couple of years earlier I met a woman Shari Kearney, and she was my idol. And I just had tremendous respect for her. [0:25:00] She had been on a couple of women's expeditions to Nepal, to Himalaya.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And she was going with a group of women to try a peak called Ama Dablam in 1982. And they were looking at me, wanting to offer young climbers an opportunity to climb in the Himalayas with a group of older women. And they were kind of watching to see how I did on Denali. And after that trip, they invited me to go climb Ama Dablam with them. Learned a tremendous amount; we were the first women to stand on top of this mountain.

**JD:** And I know we had talked a little before about kind of the issue of gender, and whether it played a role in your experiences or not. You went on to subsequent climbs with mixed-gender expeditions.

**SA:** Mm-hm.

**JD:** Do you have any recollections about any differences, or interesting pieces between the Ama Dablam climb and some of the others that you did subsequently?

**SA:** Well, I would like to be able to say, but I cannot, that when women climb together, they are incredibly supportive. It is not true. Women? Women have such high expectations of other women; women are incredibly competitive with each other. It's the same in the business world. Women do not mentor other women very well. They expect them to do the work, to perform perfectly. Where men have learned how to mentor both men and women, women have not learned that yet.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** No. The Ama Dablam climb was very, very competitive. You know, we got along fine, but there was tension there, very competitive.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** When you climb in mixed groups, there's a lot less tension. However, if you're all vying to get to the top, and you feel, if you're trying to get the first American woman to the top of a mountain, like Everest, for example—

**JD:** Sure.

**SA:** —then you're not only competing with the other women on your team, but you're competing with the men, because the men are afraid they're going to have to give up their spots just to accommodate the women.

**JD:** Right, right. And I guess this might be a trivial question, but I'm thinking about just gear. There weren't that many women climbing then, and how did it work getting gear that kind of fit women?

**SA:** [Laughs] [Pause in recording]

**JD:** Okay, so you were talking about gear.

**SA:** Oh, well, Eddie Bauer actually made a lot of our gear for Ama Dablam, and they fit us, so we—I'm fairly small, and the gear that they made for us actually fit us, the down coats, the down pants that we wore.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** But I will tell you that getting sponsorships for that climb was very interesting. As a matter of fact, I called up a company, and I don't even remember who it is at this time. [Laughs] But I was saying, "Yeah, we'll send you a picture, a photograph obviously, from the top, as part of your giving us this gift, and all of that." And they said, "You are going to pose in bikinis, aren't you?" And he said that seriously! And I said, "Well, I think maybe we don't need your gift after all." [Laughs] Anyway, so you get some funny comments like that on an all-female climb.

**JD:** Sure. [Laughs]

**SA:** [Laughs] And this was a long time ago.

**JD:** Yes, well, we like to think that.

**SA:** Yeah.

**JD:** And so, talk a little about what it's like standing at the top. I mean, certainly you've had an accomplishment, but descents are nothing to be sneezed at either.



**SA:** Right. And this is all, every mountain, I think. You work really hard, defying gravity, and going up, and all of that. And so when you get to the top, it's a real emotional experience, and you just feel that emotion going through your whole body, and you want to turn around. I want to turn around; I always want to hug somebody. You know, I just want to share that experience with people. So it isn't an intellectual thought process when you're standing on top. [0:30:00] It's strictly emotional, and yet at the same time you're very aware of the fact that the top is not the place to celebrate. You have to get down safely before you can actually let your guard down and celebrate.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And quite frankly, every time I reach the top of a mountain, I always thank the mountain for allowing me the opportunity to interact with it, and be a part of it for the moment.

**JD:** Because I think you've talked eloquently about: you can't think about conquering a mountain, or things might not turn out as one would hope.

**SA:** Right. Right. You don't conquer mountains; you work with them in order to accomplish the goal. If you try to conquer the mountain, there's just no way. We humans are small and insignificant. The mountain will always be there. And you have to work with the snow conditions you have, you have to work with the ice conditions, you have to work with the rock that you're presented with.

**JD:** Mm-hm. And so, you continued to be asked to be part of expeditions. Talk about kind of where you went from Ama Dablam?

**SA:** Oh, boy! [Laughs]

**JD:** And you can choose as many or as few of those expeditions as you would like.

**SA:** Well after Ama Dablam, I, I didn't go on organized climbs, "expedition-style," with many people working together. I did climbs with friends, and that's really what I enjoy doing, is smaller groups of people going off to climb mountains. So I did more climbing in Alaska. I climbed in South America, and just various other places. I moved to Zion National Park. Actually I moved to Springdale, Utah, which is right outside Zion National Park, and did a lot of first ascents in the park at that time. And then in 1986, I believe, a good friend of mine, Scott Fischer, obtained a permit to climb Everest from the country of Tibet, the north face of Everest. And he invited me to participate in that climb.

**JD:** And what goes into your deciding, yes, that's one that I want to do? Realizing that it was Everest, and that was a goal?

**SA:** Well [laughs], there had not been an American woman on Everest at that time.

**JD:** Mm-hm?

**SA:** And so, Scott invited me to join him because he was a very good friend of mine. We had done a lot of climbing together over the years. And it was intriguing. It was the North Face. It had only been climbed successfully once, at a very high price of missing fingers and toes, and I was intrigued by the technical challenge of the climb. And yes, obviously Everest is the highest, and I wanted to know what would it be like to stand on top? Am I physically capable? Am I mentally capable of reaching the top of that mountain? And so that basically—it was almost a no-brainer that this would be a good climb to go on.

**JD:** Mm-hm, mm-hm.

**SA:** And we were going with a group of friends. All of us knew one another. There were fifteen of us. We all knew one another, and we would have no Sherpa support on that climb, so we just did it with ourselves.

**JD:** And that was a conscious decision that the group made?

**SA:** Yeah, to save money, to save money on that climb.

**JD:** Mm-hm. And then you get there. You talked a little earlier about being on Denali: sometimes the weather cooperates, sometimes it doesn't, and that's part of the journey as well. [Laughs]

**SA:** [Laughs] So mountain climbing, and it's obviously more complicated and involved than what I'm saying, but first of all, going as a group of friends, we did not necessarily all end up working together in cooperation. And this was one of the climbs where we were trying to get the first American woman to the top, and it was highly competitive—a lot of friction that was never addressed and dealt with, a lot of conflict. Anyway, because of that, because we did not work well together as a team, we did not work efficiently; we were very slow. And by the time we made it to our higher camps, it was late in the season. [0:34:59] And on my summit attempt we were actually hit by a very severe storm. The Tibetans said later, that it was one of the worst storms in 40 years. It killed 3,000 livestock on the Tibetan Plateau; it was huge. And as a matter of fact, after the storm, we were in a snow cave at 23,500 feet for five days.

And after the storm, we decided to head up the mountain because we were still fit. We were still ready go to the top, but our ropes that we had fixed with three-foot-long aluminum stakes, the ropes and the stakes had been lifted out of the ground, and the stakes were twisted like licorice whips. That's a high wind, and I have never seen that in my life. It was astonishing! Anyway, we went up higher, spent the next three days at 25,500 feet. and the winds up higher were blowing over 100 miles an hours. It was just, you know, we had to call the shot to turn around. We did not reach the top that year. But again, we learned a lot, had time to reflect on what happened during that expedition, my part in that failure to reach the top.

I was very fortunate, because the following year I was able to go back again and climb with a different group from the south side, which is the most popular side, the South Col from the country of Nepal.

**JD:** Mm-hm, mm-hm. And talk a little about what it's like just being in these countries that, particularly 20 or 30 years ago, were kind of isolated from the rest of the world, and just that sort of cultural interface that goes on between landing, and getting to the mountain, and then being on a mountain.

**SA:** Well, climbing is a great excuse to travel. And I love travelling, I love—and I don't travel like a lot of other people. I travel and live on the local economy. I especially enjoy talking with people. Even if you don't speak the same language, you can communicate through arms, through gestures, through just different ways, and you understand each other.

So traveling to me—for example, when I was in the Soviet Union climbing, one of my partners and I went for a walk on the plains, and we met some grazers. And they invited us, the family invited us, into their yurt, and we had horse milk yogurt, and they fed us all these just fabulous, wonderful things. And we talked and learned about each other, and shared as much as we could. And that's what—I'm getting a little off-subject, but that's what travelling is to me, and climbing is just an excuse to go to other countries. Well, it's not just an excuse. [Laughs] But culturally, every place is different, and I think one of the values of climbing is to be able to experience another culture, and to come away with a better understanding.

And to this day, I leave the country probably twice a year, going to developing countries. My children have been travelling since they've been six months old, and they are comfortable interacting with people when they don't even speak the language. And my kids actually speak fluent Spanish and Mandarin. So, but we love to do that as a family.

**JD:** Mm-hm. So you have the opportunity, you're fit and ready to go. And there you are back on the mountain one year later, with a different group, and a different experience, and a different outcome.

**SA:** Yeah. And I should probably say that I went through a divorce before climbing on the North Face; three months before we left I went through a terrible divorce. And all of a sudden, the climbing changed things for me personally. I had to get to the top. I had to get to the top to prove to the world that I was somebody [0:40:00], to obviously prove to myself that I was somebody, and to prove to my ex-husband that I was somebody. And because of that—and I talked a little bit about the tension and conflict. Because of that, I knew where I was every step of the way of the climb.

**JD:** Mm-hm?

**SA:** And I didn't care who I stepped on, I just had to be first. And I was not there for my teammates. When I came off the mountain and reflected on this, I was pretty humiliated by how I acted on that climb. That's not me. That's not how I want

to be. So the following year when I was going back to Everest, I knew that things would be different. And all of a sudden, what I discovered was that on that second trip back, I didn't care if I was the first American woman on top. I didn't have anything to prove that year. I just wanted to be on the mountain, climbing.

And what happened was I freed myself up. It was not a burden anymore. I freed myself up to be a contributing member. And it was a very different climb. We weren't necessarily out there to accommodate the women. [Laughs] I think we all knew that we would have an opportunity to get to the top. And I forgot what we were talking about. [Laughs]

**JD:** Well, we were just talking about your experience of, this time you did actually get to the top, this goal that you had for a while.

**SA:** Well, and quite frankly, I was in the right place at the right time. I was prepared physically, mentally, and emotionally to get to the top. And when I say right place at the right time, we didn't all go up to the summit together. Only six people would go at any given time. We only had six oxygen units, and so it would be three Americans and three Sherpas. The Sherpas worked just as hard as we did, shoulder to shoulder, working up the mountain, and by the way, our Sherpas—we tried to save money on this trip. Again, save money, it was really important. We did not go with unionized Sherpas. We went with nonunion Sherpas, and consequently, none of our Sherpas had ever been on a mountain before. [Laughs] So we had to give them the very basics on how to climb, and most of our Sherpas did not go high on the mountain.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** But a few of them obviously did. Anyway, on my summit attempt, we started at midnight. Two of our Sherpas, as we were climbing they turned around, taking two oxygen units with them, or oxygen bottles. They were heading down the mountain, and we would need two of those oxygen bottles for all of us to make it to the top. So at 28,000 feet we actually had a lottery, and the one remaining Sherpa, Pasang, held the determining number. Steve chose 8, I chose 4, Jim chose 6, and the winning number was 3. So I got the one remaining oxygen bottle. The three of them had a decision to make. They could risk running out of oxygen and climb to the top with me, or play it safe and turn around. And Steve and Jim decided to turn around. Pasang decided that he was willing to risk it and go to the top. So, that was how I made it to the top.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And again, when I got there it was this very emotional experience, and I turned around to hug somebody and no one was there to share that with me. Pasang was about fifteen minutes behind me. So, but when he made it to the top, it was a joy for both of us.

**JD:** Mm-hm. And can you put into words what it's like standing on the top of the world, as they say?

**SA:** Well, like I said, it was purely emotional, because you worked so long and so hard just getting there, and yet, knowing that this was no place to celebrate. I mean, we had to take pictures of 35 corporate banners before we could turn around and go down. So, but what we did do is I took my oxygen off; Pasang took his oxygen off, to just conserve oxygen. We were there for about 45 minutes, and of course we were both elated, but in the 1980s you didn't take cell phones. [0:45:02] You didn't have your cell phone. You didn't have your satellite phone. You didn't have your computer at the top. So, it really wasn't until after we started down the mountain and arrived at a place where we had radio contact that any of our teammates at base camp knew that we had reached the top.

**JD:** Sure.

**SA:** But as I said, you celebrate when you get down.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And we didn't just go down. So, our high camp on Everest was at 26,000 feet, and people usually go up to the top, and then back down to 26. We went all the way down to 21,000 feet that day, and then we were ready to celebrate. [Laughs]

**JD:** [Laughs] And what does a celebration at 21,000 feet consist of?

**SA:** Well, it consists of potato chips, which the team brought up, and a bottle of beer! [Laughs]

**JD:** [Laughs]

**SA:** And that's all I wanted, potato chips and a bottle of beer.

**JD:** Sounds pretty good. And then pretty quickly, you're on the phone doing interviews with a Seattle news reporter?

**SA:** Well, we actually had Sher Stripling from *The Seattle Times*. She joined us on the expedition. She went to base camp, and she sent out news dispatches the entire for the entire expedition. And when I got back to the United States, I don't know how they find you, but David Letterman actually called the hotel I was staying in in Seattle, unbeknownst to even my parents where I was, and said, "We'd like you to come out and be interviewed." And so it was fun.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** Everest is not the ultimate. It's the highest. It opened a lot of doors; it was a stepping stone. I'm now a motivational business speaker, and I love it. And I feel very humbled by the fact that I get to go out and speak to people about leadership, and collaboration, teambuilding, taking risks, things like that, and knowing that I make a difference in that aspect. Everest, because of Everest, I am now the chairperson for the Lung Association's Climb for Clean Air/Reach the Summit. And it's a way for me to use my skills and give back to the community, and back to an organization that really makes a difference for lung health. So, little things like that.

**JD:** And talk a little about what that Reach the Summit—am I saying that right?

**SA:** Yeah, Climb for Clean Air.

**JD:** Yeah, what that involves?

**SA:** Well, Climb for Clean Air/Reach the Summit is an opportunity for participants, people who sign up, to climb either Mount Hood, which is in Oregon, Mount Adams, which is in Washington, or Mount Rainier, and sometimes we even add the Grand Teton. And they have to raise a certain amount of money to participate in one of those climbs. And we don't just leave them by themselves once they sign up. We help them raise their money. We take them, starting in February, every single weekend we do hikes, so that they're building up their strength and their endurance, and that. And then our climbs are guided, so they are very safe. Safety is the number one thing. And again, it's a way for them to do something healthy for themselves, and to give back. And the money that we raise goes to the Pacific Mountain Region of the American Lung Association, for policy work, for education, and it's all around lung health.

**JD:** And it's kind of a nice circle of thinking about, talking about other people who are teaching you, and then you being able to share that opportunity with other people who might not have thought they could do it?

**SA:** Right, and that's what that's all about. The people who participate in these climbs, many of them have never been hiking in their lives. Most of them have never climbed a mountain. So it is a way to teach people to learn about the out of doors. And they may never climb a mountain again, but they have a respect for what it is to be in the outdoors [0:50:00], and a healthy respect, quite frankly, for what it is to be able to breathe. Because when you're going up a mountain, you're huffing and puffing, and that may be what someone with asthma feels every day at sea level. Or COPD, the huffing and puffing. And so it's a way to kind of connect in a different way at a different level.

**JD:** Mm-hm. Well, in addition to the interesting opportunities that being a motivational speaker has provided, you have also had another interesting business of being a general contractor, and renovating classic homes. Talk about how you got interested in that, and what that involves?

**SA:** My first husband was an architect-builder, and he is a true artist. He makes materials bend for him. I have learned from him, and when I moved from Utah back to Portland, Oregon, I knew that I wanted to continue building. But I didn't want to work on new construction. I wanted to work on the wonderful older homes that we have in this area, and try to

preserve the architecture. So what my business does, and when I say my business, that includes my subcontractors who work with me, who have been working with me for years, and years, and years. What we do is we bring older homes back to life. And we don't do—I buy the projects myself. So when I say we bring them back to life, we don't make them look like modern construction. We go in and we try to make it look like the period in which it comes from, and it's a wonderful thing to be able to preserve the architecture that we have here.

**JD:** And there's some amazing architecture from a whole variety of periods, so.

**SA:** Absolutely.

**JD:** To be able to dabble in all those different periods must be exciting.

**SA:** No, I mean, yes, to pick and choose the period, and then do the research, and make the homes look like that period. Yeah, they have to be updated with insulation, and new wiring.

**JD:** Mm-hm, sure. You're not going back into the gas lanterns? [Laughs]

**SA:** [Laughs] But we could do gas.

**JD:** Well, and so in your own life, Everest was one big goal that you had, but at some point then you figure out, well, there's a next step and a new goal. And talk a little about that transition of deciding, well, maybe I'm not going up high mountains anymore.

**SA:** Well, Everest—after Everest I did a lot of climbing in other countries, and then the last expedition I did, I led, to a high mountain; it was K2, in 1993. And after that I came home, and had my first child. And all of the sudden, you have a child, and you have decisions to make. And I knew that this no longer was about me and pursuing my goals. It was about raising two sons, after my second child was born—about raising two sons to be kind, caring, contributing adults. And that was my goal. So I continued to climb smaller mountains, continued to rock climb. As a family, we whitewater kayak and raft, we mountain bike, we ski. So we still get out, but it's different. And now that my kids are older, I'm thinking about climbing. [Laughs]

**JD:** [Laughs]

**SA:** As a matter of fact, last summer I spent three weeks on the Canadian-Alaska border, climbing.

**JD:** So perhaps some more summits in your future?

**SA:** We'll see; we'll see.

**JD:** [Laughs] You've talked a little about teamwork. Is there more to be said about sort of what your approach to leadership is, and how good things can be accomplished?

**SA:** With leadership, I think first of all it boils down to [laughs]—sorry. [0:55:06] Leadership is really tricky. [Laughs] We're going to cut all of this out, right?

**JD:** Sure.

**SA:** Yeah, sure. You're only a leader if people are willing to follow you. And my whole take on leadership is that you have got to listen to the people that you're leading, and to listen to their ideas, not just listen, but actually hear what they're saying, and to be able to incorporate their ideas, their suggestions. Because you're the leader doesn't mean you know everything. But on the other hand, we are all leaders. Everyone in an organization is a leader at a certain level, and you have got to understand how you fit in, not just on a micro level, but in the big picture of the success of a climbing expedition, in the success of an organization.

But each and every one of us contributes to the success on some level. We have to be able to think, and implement our ideas, and the leader, his or her role is to make sure that everyone understands how they fit in. Yes, their role is also to

come up, you know, what is the strategy? What is the vision? But you don't do that by yourself. You do that with other people that you surround yourself with. Yadda, yadda, yadda. [Laughs]

**JD:** Well, and I think perhaps to bring it back around to sort of where we started in talking about OSU, how would you connect sort of where you went, where you have gone so far in your life, with things that, and people that you met at Oregon State? What did you take away from there?

**SA:** Well, when I went to Oregon State, I was very naïve. I was a small farm-town girl. Yet I knew, I guess at some level, by meeting people who were from all over the United States, who had different interests and similar interests to me, I knew that just because I was from a small town didn't mean I had to stay in a small place, and that through my experience at Oregon State—and I truly believe that when you go off to college it really is a new chapter. You're opening yourself up to the world, to new and different people, and you can't possibly help but thinking bigger.

**JD:** Mm-hm.

**SA:** And coming to terms with what you want to contribute personally to this world. And at some level I think that's what really struck me about going to Oregon State. Even though I didn't finish school, I did try going back for a couple more semesters, but I didn't finish. And that's one thing that I have left undone in my life.

**JD:** [Laughs]

**SA:** And who knows? Now that we've got online classes [laughs], this might be a good time for me to go back and actually get my degree.

**JD:** Would you have any advice, or perhaps thoughts that you would like to give to current OSU students? Things that they might ponder while they're there, or take with them forward in their lives?

**SA:** Well, one thing that I think every university, every college, should do before they graduate any student is to have their students live abroad, and I'm not talking about in Europe—live abroad in a developing country for at least three months, to really learn about other cultures, to understand that we are a global society now, that we are not insular. And I think a lot of Americans don't understand that. We are removed from much of the rest of the world. [1:00:01] So that would be my one thing.

Also, follow your heart. Do what you want to do. There's a lot of pressure, from family, from peers, to go in a certain direction. And it's okay if you don't know what you want to do. Experiment, figure it out. That's the only way you are ever going to discover what your true passion is. But again, it comes from—the passion that you have for what you end up doing in life filters into the rest of your life.

**JD:** That's great. Any final thoughts?

**SA:** [Laughs] I don't have any thoughts! No!

**JD:** You have plenty of fine thoughts. Well, with that, I would say thanks for taking the time and contributing. [1:00:56]