

On May 26, 2013, I found myself struggling.

Clad in adventurer's gear, with a bandana encasing an American flag on my head, I set out to will our class, 12 photography students, up a mountain. We were summiting Guadalupe Peak, the tallest mountain in Texas at 8,750 feet. My job was to bring up the rear, and encourage the back of the pack with signature bad jokes and positivity.

This class had come far already. Through scorpion bites, sketchy hotels, miles and miles of highway, we were still together and still tackling this obstacle as a team. Now as we began our trek up the mountain, I knew our lives would be changed. But I was surprised by how much.

It was on the trail of this summit that I found myself struggling against the weight of my 70-pound pack, the extreme Texas heat, and the steep incline ahead of me. Near the top of the trail, after four hours of hiking, helping students with their loads, making sure everyone stays hydrated, and plodding one foot after another, I hit a wall. I was exhausted, wiped out, and I realized that the 20-year old college students had a little more spring than I do. My heart was fluttering, my extremities were tingling, my nose prickled and stung with each breath in the thin mountain air, my lungs burning and the stitch in my side growing sharper with each breath. I had doubt.

What once seemed so sure, now seemed inconceivable. I was out of jokes, I was out of encouragement, and I was out of drive.

And then, one student began to speak.

As we neared the summit campground, she came to a realization much different than mine. She realized she would make it. She realized we were nearing the top, and that the dream was in sight. She found joy. She found encouragement. She found drive. She found actualization that she could not contain. Her words leaked out in careful profundity, aimed at no one and everyone.

"Life is like this mountain," She said, slowly at first, then gaining speed.

"Life is like this mountain, and we are going to make it!"

Her certainty was undeniable. Why?

Climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

Barbara's first attempt at college was in 1981, at Michigan State University. She was 17. She was heartbroken when financial difficulties forced her to withdraw. She had a rough two semesters, and was not in good academic standing. She felt discouraged and defeated. But there in a low moment of self-doubt, she began to climb.

Life is full of mountains.

Barbara married David Hosler. David joined the Army and their growing family began to move around. Each move was a mountain in itself, but climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

The life of a military wife is a special kind of mountain. There are difficult horizons and valleys of uncertainty. Absence and isolation can certainly strain some families. Barbara forged out a familial force of spiritual significance. Her family, strong and faithful, kept climbing. Under her shepherding guidance, they grew, child by child, step by step, into beautiful, mature, strong, joyful climbers. Climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

Life is full of mountains.

In 1994, the Army led the Hoslers to Texas. Across the next decade, David was stationed at three different areas of the state, and each one offered its own unique valleys, peaks, rocks and boulders. Climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

At every move, she climbed. She took classes at junior and community colleges. She pieced together coursework and hours, and earned an Associate's Degree from El Paso Community College in 2010. Climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

In the meantime, Barbara kept supporting her husband and her children in their dreams and in their growth.

Barbara's oldest daughter graduated from Texas A&M in 2011. Climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

Life is full of mountains.

David was deployed to Iraq in 2011. Sometimes mountains are far away.

Sometimes mountains have canyons before they reach up for the sky. Barbara applied to Texas A&M in May 2011. She was rejected. Canyons can be dark and forboding, but Barbara continued to climb. She applied again. She found Agricultural Communications and Journalism. She was accepted. Her trail had begun.

When I first met Barbara at her new student conference in the summer of 2012, I told her that parents had to wait outside while students registered. She grinned and with all the grace and empathy of a true climber, she said, "I *am* the student."

She has met her classmates, some younger than her own children, with compassion, joy, friendship, empathy, encouragement and more. She is a true Aggie. She rides busses, crams with Monster energy drinks, owns more maroon t-shirts than anything else, and joins innumerable causes of student organizations. But it's not without challenge.

Life is full of mountains.

Deployment. Baghdad. Family. Marriage. Moving. Classes. School. Rejection. Children. Growing. Learning. Trying. Acceptance. Actualization. Life is full of mountains, but climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

At the beginning of her senior year, Barbara was a 4.0 student, with graduation in sight.

Then I found myself behind her, on a trail in the Guadalupe Mountains National Park.

I was done. I was defeated. I was downtrodden. But climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

She began to relate climbing this mountain before us to her life. She equated mountains to marriage, family, school, work, searching, and each word left her and wrapped the rest of us in unseen hands. Her words literally lifted me up, one step at a time. She kept climbing. Her words soared. Her words pulled and raised. Her joy was contagious. Her encouragement was indomitable. Her spirit could not be conquered. Her heart was a champion. And she climbed the mountain.

We all climbed the mountain.

There on the summit, with the winds blowing and the views stealing my breath, I realized that this may be the first peak that she had ever summited, but climbing mountains is nothing new to Barbara Hosler.

Life is full of mountains. What's one more?