

Peak performer



Zac York (left), a student at High Tech High School, worked out on a medicine ball with his trainer, David Weck. York, a cancer survivor, is aiming to climb Mount Whitney. Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune

Teen cancer survivor trains for a Mount Whitney climb

Six mornings a week, Zac York attacks altitude with attitude, gingerly negotiating a 70-plus-step stairway at Miramar College.

Ten trips up, 10 more down, usually clinging to a handrail, sometimes steeling himself to proceed on his own.

For York, an 18-year-old cancer survivor who has undergone 17 surgeries in six years, each stride is a triumph in itself.

"Some people in his situation might still be in a wheelchair," said David Weck, his personal trainer.

The obstacles in his way are not so much gravity as ataxia, an inability to coordinate muscular movements; osteoporosis, bone deterioration that resulted in a broken hip; and an unnatural lumbar curve in which the back arches forward.

Yet each workout, even each school day of toting an overburdened backpack from class to class, takes York

closer to his ultimate goal: climbing Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous 48 states.

"I'll do it if I have to crawl," he said.

Scheduled for July, York's quest to scale the 14,494-foot peak, about 90 miles from Death Valley, will be a team effort. Accompanied by his father, Chris Wimpey, and as many as 11 other seasoned climbers, he will trade his cane for trekking poles and climb with the blessing of his physician, Dr. Michael Edwards.

For all its self-affirming value, the five-to-six-day effort will be anything but a vertical ego trip. York is doing it to raise money for pediatric brain tumor awareness and as a senior project at High Tech High School, a college-prep charter school in Point Loma.

Moreover, he wants to fulfill a commitment he made to his father when the two decided to climb Mount Whitney six years ago. Shortly after that, York was diagnosed

with a brain tumor.

A hastily arranged surgery resulted in complications. York developed pressure on the brain, requiring repeated surgical procedures to install and revise shunts. Then came radiation treatments, followed by more surgery, the last one a year ago.

Through it all, the climb he had planned never left his mind.

As the big day nears, he hopes to modify his school schedule, arranging days off that will permit him to travel to hiking destinations with his dad. Among them: Joshua Tree National Park, Lake Tahoe and parts of Arizona.

Meanwhile, he'll show up six mornings a week at about 7 a.m. at the Miramar College stairwell, doing his human elevator impressions.

"If you have the will, your body finds the way," Weck said. "Zac is a fighter. He's making incredible progress."