

For blind mountain climber, 'Believing is seeing'

By JOYCE TSAI
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Four years ago, Erik Weihenmayer became a mountain climbing legend.

He was the first blind person to reach the top of Mount Everest and, a year later, to summit the highest peaks on seven continents.

He lost his sight at age 13 to retinoschisis, a degenerative eye disease that causes the retina to detach and gradually split. Uncertain of what the future would hold for him then, he went on a rock climbing trip that transformed his life.

He said the experience of navigating the rock's face, feeling the unique features of its surface and grasping for the summit became a symbol for all he was determined to achieve, sightless or not, he said.

Now at age 37, he continues to inspire others to defy the odds, whether it's leading blind Tibetan children up mountain trails or speaking to the sighted about how to overcome adversity and set goals to achieve the seemingly impossible.

He spoke at the Reece & Nichols Realtors annual celebration at the Overland Park Convention Center on Wednesday afternoon.

He answered three questions from The Star about how he's faced the challenges of being a blind mountain climber and how mountain climbing has become a transformative force in his life.

Q: You've said the most annoying question you get is, "Why climb when you can't see the view from the top?" How do you respond to that?

A: It's a funny question. I understand where it comes from, because people equate sight to life and beauty. ... You get so much stimulation and information from it. But for me, I'm experiencing a lot even though I can't see.

I've learned to understand the world and appreciate beauty through the senses I have in my hands, my feet, my sense of smell....I'm experiencing the terrain under my feet, the way the snow feels and crunches and how deep it is. When I'm climbing an ice face I'm rhythmically swinging my tools on the mountain face, and the wind and sun are in my face.