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Burb's Eye View: Oldest Everest climber returns to his dream

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By Bryan Mahoney
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Bill Burke's childhood home was carved into the side of the Verdugo hills. At age 70, he will attempt to carve a record on the tallest mountain in the world.

He remembers as a kid roaming the dusty paths and sun-beaten brush of his Burbank backyard on the east side of the Verdugos near Glendale. Burke, the son of former Burbank Mayor Earle William Burke, and his family eventually moved to another part of the mountain — from La Rambla in the east to Groton Drive near Stough Canyon.

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At Burbank High School in the late 1950s, Bill Burke met Sharon, a girl he would marry while still in college. This June, they will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

But first, there's something Bill Burke must do. He must return to Sharon after he climbs Mt. Everest. Twice.

"She was originally nervous about it...she says it worries her most when I'm up high on the mountain," Burke said. "But she knows I'm a conservative climber...so she trusts me. She's been very supportive."

In 2009, Burke became the oldest American to climb Mt. Everest and return alive. On April 3, he will begin a new trek up "the mountain of my dreams," as he calls it.

This will be the sixth year in a row he has attempted Everest — a feat made more impressive considering he only started serious climbing 10 years ago, at age 60.

He has already reached the summit of the highest peak in

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"Everyone seems to think the physical part is so important, and it is, but I always tell people the mental commitment is one of the keys to success: learning from your mistakes, and adjusting, not succumbing to the temptation to go home," he said.

At the highest point on Earth, you're about 29,000 feet up. It's a safe cruising altitude for a flight from L.A. to New York. Not as safe for a human trying to breathe.

Atop Everest, it smells like any other cold winter day, Burke said.

"All you think about is how cold it is. If you're skiing on a mountain, that's what it smells like."

He has experienced every emotion on the mountains. The heartache of missing home and family is ever-present; the disappointment of turning back is tempered by the bodies of climbers he must pass by along the way.

"At a certain altitude, they don't bring down the bodies — too high. You don't want to be one of them," Burke said.

There is no part of the Everest climb that is easy, yet Burke still plans to push it. There is only a two-week window in May in which the weather conditions permit climbers their goal. He will first attempt an ascent on the south side in Nepal, spending weeks acclimating to the lack of oxygen. Then, his blood accustomed to the mountain climate, he will travel to Tibet to climb the north side.

The double-ascent has never been done.

"When that gauntlet was thrown down I had to pick it up," Burke said. "Even on the smaller mountains, there's one time you think, 'What am I doing here? Why don't I go home and try it another time?' You just have to work through that and realize why you're there: you set a goal and you should do it."

He has the support of his wife and family, who help him maintain a [Twitter](#) feed of his adventures and a website that chronicles every step. But there's one family member whose support means more than anything to Burke: his training partner and grandson, 11-year-old Oliver "Ollie" Dillon.

Ollie displays symptoms of Angelman Syndrome, a developmental disorder. Though he cannot speak and only recently began to walk, he joins Burke every Sunday on 50-mile bike rides in a cart attached to the back of Burke's bike. And on Everest, Burke will take every step wearing a knit cap with the words "Ollie Power" on it.

Before he leaves, Burke will host a speaking tour throughout the area. On Feb. 18 at 2 p.m., he will visit the Gordon R. Howard Museum to show a presentation of his expeditions.

He usually speaks at elementary schools, teaching children the importance of working toward their dreams.

"I've done the highest peak on every continent, and it's not because I'm special in any way...it's because I worked really hard at my goals to achieve them," he said.

For older audiences he is a hero, a reminder that life begins at retirement. Burke's own hero will be waiting for him at the end of his long journey.

"I committed myself from the time Ollie was born that I'd be very involved in his life," Burke said. "I think about him all the time — he's my inspiration and my hero."

BRYAN MAHONEY is a recent transplant from the East Coast. When he's not tiptoeing up the Verdugos, he can be reached at 818NewGuy@gmail.com and on Twitter [@818NewGuy](https://twitter.com/818NewGuy).



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