

# Implosion

Connecticut Climbers Defied Death At The Top Of The World, No One Imagined The View Would Turn So Ugly.

By MICHAEL KODAS

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Northeast Magazine Cover Story

Anne Parmenter, co-leader of the Connecticut Everest Expedition, was too busy settling the team's accounts at a mountaineering company in Katmandu, Nepal, to notice the workers hanging a bright red banner honoring the group.

"... Congratulations To Mr. George Dijmarescu For Your Sixth Consecutive Summit, To Ms. Lhakpa Sherpa For Her Fourth World Record Successful Summit And To the Members of the Connecticut [sic] Mt. Everest Expedition," read the pennant, a full 10 feet wide.

By mountaineering measures, it had been a successful expedition. A week earlier, four of the team's seven members reached the highest point on Earth. But when Anne stepped onto the balcony of the fourth-floor office of Asian Trekking on May 27 and saw the banner, she responded with anything but pride.

"Take it down," the Trinity coach told Dawa Sherpa, the company's business manager. "If you're going to recognize him," she declared, her voice rising in anger, "I'm not paying my bill." Dawa brought scissors from his office to help Anne slice out George Dijmarescu's name. When Dawa found the edited version too ugly to display, Anne offered to pay for a new one. But the tribute never hung again.

Nothing in the e-mail signed by George that I received five days later indicated he knew about the edited flag. Still, he was livid with Anne.

"From now on, I will do all I can to hunt this bitch down, like a hiena [sic]," he wrote.

In another e-mail, sent to the entire team a week later, he cautioned Anne against badmouthing him to a corporate sponsor.

"... I am warning you and yes I am threatening you, you will be very sorry," the Romanian immigrant wrote. "I promise I will give you the opportunity to see worst [sic] in your life."

Two weeks later, a neighbor noticed a strange truck parked in front of Anne's house while she was away. Its description matched that of George's truck, and Anne notified the Bristol police and showed them a copy of the e-mail he had sent the team. They, in turn, contacted George. He denied visiting her home and promised to send no more e-mails.

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Six months earlier, just after Thanksgiving, I had introduced the two mountaineers at a pub between Anne's Trinity College office and the West End walkup George shares with his wife, Lhakpa Sherpa. Earlier in the fall, I had run into George and Lhakpa, who live a few blocks from me, as they pushed their 15-month-old daughter, Sunny, in a stroller. George told me his dream of organizing an Everest team from Connecticut. But he didn't know many climbers here, he said, and asked if I might make some introductions. At the time, I was proud to plant the seeds that might grow into an Everest expedition.



As a mountaineer, I had never yearned to climb Everest. Hundreds of shorter peaks have more graceful lines and more technical challenges. Everest's reputation as one of the world's costliest adventures was as daunting as its death toll.

But the mountain Tibetans call Chomolungma -- the Goddess Mother of the World -- has many seductions: fame, riches, bragging rights. For me, the mountain was a big character in an epic drama, but not the biggest. I was more enchanted by the chance to tell the story of George, who swam the Danube River to escape communism and then climbed Everest five straight years, and Lhakpa, an illiterate single mother who came of age in the shadow of the mountain before climbing it to earn a better life.

I was surprised when my editors at The Courant fell under the same spell; shocked when they agreed to pay my way. The idea was to climb Everest with the expedition, transmit photos and stories to the paper and then follow George and Lhakpa to the world's second-highest peak, K2, a far more challenging climb on the other side of the Himalayas. There I would report from base camp, on the Pakistan side of the mountain, as the couple attempted a jaw-dropping feat: summiting Everest and K2 in the same season. Carolyn Moreau, my wife and a Courant reporter, would accompany the team, write a free-lance blog for the newspaper's website, ctnow.com, and videotape the expedition as far as its summit push on Everest. I told George's story in a front-page profile that ran on March 29 -- the day we left for the Himalayas.

Lhakpa's story landed on Page 1 three weeks later. Before the expedition got under way, our relationship was unusually warm. But, although George beamed and slapped me on the back when he read his profile, I sensed him growing cold and hostile as we neared the frigid peril of Everest. By the time we reached the mountain, he and Lhakpa were hardly speaking to Carolyn or me.

I felt obligated to cover the tensions, even when I didn't understand what had brought them on. And the more we wrote about the crumbling team, the faster it fell apart. My enthusiasm, both as a climber and as a journalist, helped bring seven mountaineers together and get us to Tibet. My efforts also were part of the team's undoing.

I climbed down from the rubble of the Connecticut Everest Expedition to send my last dispatch from Katmandu in late May after nearly two months on the mountain. It's taken me twice that long to figure out how a group of onetime friends collapsed in an avalanche of intimidation, abuse and recrimination.

Three of us failed to climb to the top of the world. But my disappointment as a mountaineer pales beside the guilt and embarrassment I feel for my part in an adventure that brought threats to a close friend, suffering to my wife, and burdened dozens of people chasing their dreams in one of the most inhospitable environments on Earth. Six climbers from the camps around the Connecticut Everest Expedition perished on the mountain during the week our party headed to the summit. Any one of us could have been among them.

Last year, when George and Lhakpa, two of the world's most experienced Everest climbers, invited me to join them in Tibet, the world's highest mountain seemed to shine like a beacon through my neighborhood. In late spring, when I returned from the Himalayas suspicious enough of them to install a home security system, I realized the mountain on the other side of the globe cast a shadow long enough to fall on my house.

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Anne Parmenter grew up in England dreaming of Everest. As a coach of women's sports, she knew how to organize athletes and raise money. As a guide, she had stood atop major peaks in South America and Alaska, as well as Ama Dablam, a 22,494-foot mountain just 12 miles from Everest's summit -- a climb we made together. Still, Anne considered the top of the world out of reach until George, who had completed successful ascents of Everest in each of the previous five seasons, proposed that she and I join him to create the Connecticut Everest Expedition.

At 6 feet 2, George was nearly 9 inches taller than the petite coach. Anne thought that George, in his Adidas shoes, warm-up jacket, ponytail and mustache, looked more like a soccer fan than a mountaineer. She was surprised that a man who had climbed Everest five times could live in her backyard without her hearing about him.

Nevertheless, as soon as he dangled Everest in front of her, she was mesmerized.

It's not that hard, he said over a round of beer.

"I can see it in your eyes," he said, leaning toward Anne. "You can climb this mountain."

His \$12,000-a-person budget -- plus \$3,200 for each climber who hired a Sherpa -- was cheap compared with the \$65,000 charged by the best commercial expeditions. With the companionship of George and his wife, who had climbed Everest three times, the price seemed to buy excellent odds of success.

And, if George's plans came off, we would be part of something historic: George and Lhakpa's Everest/K2 doubleheader. Although none of their Connecticut Everest teammates would climb K2 with them, we all felt part of the endeavor.

Hartford, January 2004

We called it the Connecticut Everest Expedition because we didn't have time to think of anything better. Most Everest expeditions take a year or more to plan. We had three months to raise money, equip the team and arrange our flights, permits, Sherpas and cooks.

Early support proved promising. Anne, consumed by the project, garnered a team invitation to the state Capitol, found someone to make a batch of free promotional T-shirts for the climbers to hawk, and had

additional shirts printed at a discount when sales exceeded expectations. She ran off posters and postcards and arranged a slide show by George through the Ragged Mountain Foundation. The show packed a hall at Trinity, raising team spirits. Colleagues at the college cut checks to the expedition. Her lacrosse players gave part of their meal money.

Will Manzer, CEO of Eastern Mountain Sports, heard about the expedition and offered sponsorship: about \$20,000 worth of equipment and \$1,600 in cash to buy boots. The EMS support prodded a mountain guide from Suffield, Chuck Boyd, who had been waffling, to commit. He, in turn, recruited Southington native Dave Watson, a climbing guide and ski patroller working in Vermont.

Bill Driggs, a hard-core triathlete, called me as soon as he heard about the expedition. His wrist was still in a cast from a skiing accident when he met the team at one of our weekly gatherings.

"This is the kind of team I want to be a part of," he said afterward.

Within a couple weeks, Bill had arranged the expedition's most successful fund-raiser -- a \$20-a-person reception at the Mitchell Land Rover dealership in Canton capped by a \$1,000 donation from the owner.

Bill recruited a local vineyard to donate wine. He paid for the wine glasses himself.

Three months after their first meeting, George recommended Anne as co-leader of the expedition.

"As a woman, as a coach, she will be able to keep us working as a team," he said.

"George, you have the climbing experience on Everest," she responded.

"I'm a laborer, not a leader," he said. "Because of that English accent, people listen to you."

In the Himalayas, he said, people listen to Lhakpa, who, although she cannot read or write, speaks both Tibetan and Nepali. She would lead there. The Chinese, he said, are less likely to trouble an expedition with female leadership.

Struck by the irony of an illiterate woman leading an expedition because of her language skills, I suggested we teach Lhakpa to read during the trip.

"The biggest favor you will be doing is for me," George said.

Anne suggested the team could also help Lhakpa pursue U.S. citizenship.

"She doesn't need that," George responded.

Despite her misgivings, Anne agreed to share the leadership duties with Lhakpa. The entire team, however, knew that George would be our man on the mountain, using his experience to negotiate with the trekking agency, select Sherpas and plan the ascent. But that experience, we all realized, was as narrow as it was deep. Although his six trips to the north side of Everest gave him an encyclopedic knowledge of our climbing route, he had climbed only a handful of mountains. He had little experience with crevasses, virtually no avalanche training and few navigational skills. He laughed when I spoke of practicing to "self-arrest" -- the basic skill of using an ice ax to keep from sliding off a mountain. We puzzled over the same question that most climbers who meet George ask: "Why do you climb the same route on the same mountain every year?"

George said he loved the mountain and the people on it, but even Lhakpa said she would like to climb one of the other Himalayan giants: Cho Oyu or Shishipangma.

The team held its last U.S. meeting at George and Lhakpa's apartment a week before departing. We had a daunting to-do list but celebrated nonetheless with berry wine George's mother had made in Romania.

During the days that followed, as the team raced between banks, EMS, the state Capitol and The Courant, the good feelings evaporated.

George's fund-raising slideshow at Yale University, four days before our departure, was poorly attended. I was one of the no-shows, and George blamed me, not only for the weak turnout by other climbers, but for the team's generally meager finances. He dreamed of the kind of well-heeled expedition he had seen on Everest in years past. If I pushed The Courant, he said, the newspaper would pay not only for Carolyn and me, but also sponsor the other climbers. My explanation of the ethics that prevent a newspaper from paying its subjects' way up Everest only seemed to make him suspect we were exploiting him.

My ambition was an elaborate, multimedia telling of the expedition's story. In addition to weekly stories and photographs in the paper, satellite technology made daily weblogs from the mountain possible, complete with audio, video and interactive maps. I also proposed that the Newspaper in Education program at The Courant run first-person stories from each of the climbers. George, who already had a long-term relationship with Timothy Edwards Middle School in South Windsor, could now tell his story in schools across the state.

It was uncharted territory for everyone. None of the mountaineers had climbed with such a heavy intrusion of media. Newspapers rarely allow staff members to be both storytellers and subjects. And I had never covered people on whom my life depended so completely. Like anyone walking new ground, our first steps were awkward.

The week before our departure for the Himalayas, Carolyn and I brought the entire team into the paper for video interviews, portrait sessions and planning meetings. Courant editors sought the team's permission to use the video Carolyn would shoot, along with footage they took themselves, for TV news coverage and, perhaps, a documentary. The proposal wasn't well received.

All the attention, in fact, convinced George that The Courant, Carolyn and I would make thousands of dollars covering the expedition, and that we were planning to cut the rest of the climbers out of those

profits. He spent \$4,000 on his own professional-grade video camera just days before we left and said he had a contact in Romania who would help him produce his own documentary. Chuck also was wary of our plans to chronicle the expedition. Computers, satellite phones and e-mail were not things he liked bringing on a climb.

"I go to the mountains to get away from that stuff," he said during a team meeting. "Dave and I are going to climb a mountain, not play on computers."

Chuck's complaints weren't limited to the media.

He was upset with George for inviting three climbers who were not members of the expedition to share our permit, a pair of novice climbers named Dan Lochner and Dan Meggitt, and a young Mexican named Guillermo Carro Blaizac, who had befriended George on Everest in 2002 but failed to summit.

Despite suspicions of the ongoing media coverage, the team realized it at least allowed them to continue fund-raising while they were out of the country. Anne arranged for Trinity College to host an expedition website independent of The Courant, and a local accountant kept track of donations and T-shirt orders. The expedition members who didn't work for The Courant made plans to share equally the money the team raised, after they returned. Both George and Chuck requested payments on their last weekend in Connecticut, but the team agreed to cut checks only to George and Lhakpa because they were the team's only parents. They received \$4,000, as well as two airline tickets to Bangkok from donations of frequent flyer miles from Bill's co-workers at Sweet Waverly Printing Co. in Portland. The rest of the team had to take care of their own expenses until we returned.

It was easy to dismiss last-minute disputes as pre-expedition stress. Even the mellowest climbers are tense in the days before a big expedition, and this, after all, was Everest.

"It will get better when we get to Katmandu," Anne said. Lhakpa was also eager to get to Katmandu, but she wasn't sure things would get better for her.

Just 36 hours before we departed for the Himalayas, Carolyn visited Lhakpa in her apartment. George was at work. "My heart, it is so heavy," Lhakpa said.

She and George were having problems, she said. "This man, oh, I cannot live with this man."

The next day she asked to speak to me when I called the house. "Michael?" she asked, and then burst into tears.

"What did you say to her?" George demanded when he got on the phone.

Katmandu, April 1

We arrived in Katmandu knowing our time there would be critically short. Nepal's Maoist rebels had called for a strike that would shut down the country just a few days after our arrival. Violent demonstrations against the king drew mobs into the streets every day. And we had landed in the Himalayas without such vital gear as boots and stoves, which we had decided might be easier to pick up in the Himalayas. I was troubled that the team seemed more interested in partying than preparing. But even Carolyn and I were looking forward to the Sherpa family reunion.

Lhakpa's only consolation at leaving her 20-month-old daughter in the U.S. was the chance to see her son, Nima, 9, who lives in Katmandu with one of Lhakpa's sisters. The family gathering was the first time she had seen him in 10 months. Her family had come from the high Himalayas as well as Florida and France for the celebration.

As the Sherpas gathered around a fire in the backyard of Lhakpa's sister's home, George sat in the darkness with Guillermo and "the Dans." He approached Lhakpa's parents late in the evening. Doni, Lhakpa's 16-year-old sister, had at age 15 set the youth record on Everest climbing with George and Lhakpa in 2003. George wanted her on this year's team, too, but her parents didn't want her climbing Everest again.

Doni stepped away and stared at her shoes as George argued with her family.

"Look at her," he said. "You can tell she wants to climb."

"I no climb now," Doni said. "I go to school."

In Katmandu, climbers who arrive without cook kits, stoves or boots are easy marks. Lhakpa's brother, Mingma, was the first climbing Sherpa brought onto the team, and he was eager to shop for the thousands of dollars of gear we still needed. Lhakpa said Sherpas got better deals, but some team members worried we were getting gouged.

Chuck complained when he learned that his Sherpa's oxygen would cost him \$1,200. I brought up the mounting expenses during dinner at a restaurant appropriately named Fire and Ice.

George responded angrily: "I suppose you're going to claim that I didn't tell you that you must pay tips to your Sherpas for the trips they make to higher camps either." He hadn't.

The trekking agency charged \$3,200 for each climbing Sherpa, but their tips and oxygen would put the tab for each climber who summited with a Sherpa over \$6,500.

When I stepped away from the table, Anne told me later, George complained about my questions about money and said the Sherpas know who the cheap climbers are.

When I returned, he told of an Austrian climber who had failed to return a tent and a sleeping bag George had left for him in a high camp on Everest. The climber was back.

"I'm going to Camp One and cut his tent loose and throw it off the mountain," George said. "And I'm not going to do it when he's acclimatizing. I'm going to wait until he's making his summit push." (None of the Austrians on the mountain this year reported any problems with George or their tents.)

On our last night in Katmandu, amid frantic packing, Lhakpa threw a party at one of Nepal's finest hotels. She was paying for the event, she said, with money left to her by Lopsang Sherpa -- the mountaineer who had fathered Nima -- when he perished on Everest in 1997.

The team trickled in fashionably late to find a conference room filled with journalists and government officials. Lhakpa sat on a stage with several Nepali dignitaries. Nameplates showed that Anne and I also were expected to speak.

George scolded Anne for her tardiness and glared at me when I arrived a few minutes later. As we took our turns at the microphone, he paced in front of us, videotaping the announcement that Lhakpa Sherpa, the first Nepali woman to climb Mount Everest, had come from her adopted home in the United States to lead the first Connecticut expedition to Everest.

The surprise press conference was surreal. Just as strange was Lhakpa's insistence that we hide her marriage to George. She asked us not to mention her marriage to anyone in Nepal and told Everest historian Elizabeth Hawley that she and George aren't married.

There were other things to hide.

For months, George had warned Carolyn and me to conceal our profession. If the Chinese found out we were journalists, he warned, they would arrest us.

But, when my turn came to speak at the press conference, I was introduced as a journalist in front of representatives from the Chinese embassy.

"If he gets busted," Chuck joked, "we're just going to take his gear and split it up."

After the press conference there was indeed a party on the hotel lawn, complete with Asian delicacies, an open bar and a healthy dose of stress brought on by our impending departure.

Base Camp, April 12

On expeditions to most Himalayan peaks, the climbers walk to Base Camp. The weeks-long journey allows them to gradually adjust to the higher altitude and arrive at the mountain as healthy as possible. But on the north side of Everest, where we staged our assault, the Chinese truck the climbers to Base Camp in a matter of days. The camp's 17,000-foot elevation, and the lack of adequate acclimatization on the way in, makes most visitors sick for a few days. Chuck had a stomach bug when we arrived in Base Camp. I was taking my first round of antibiotics to clear up a bad cough. We all tied scarves over our faces to protect our lungs from the dust, smoke and cold. The masks made us look like bandits. We fit right in.

Base Camp looked more like a mining town than a mountaineering camp. Colorful Tibetan tents like small houses were spread cheek to jowl up to a fetid pond. Yaks were tied in alleyways and wandered on the surrounding hillsides. Large expeditions sprawled out into subdivisions on the vast moraine beyond a hill topped by the Chinese liaison officer's house.

Cardboard signs, scrawled with names to lure westerners -- Hotel California and the Everest Bed and Breakfast -- offered booze and bunks. Cases of beer departed for the 21,500-foot Advanced Base Camp on the backs of porters and yaks. Women were said to be available as well, although not as openly. The pungent odor of animal dung and human waste was eased occasionally by the scent of burning hashish.

Expedition doctors are known to treat venereal diseases and brawling injuries as well as altitude sickness.

"You're in the Wild West," Chuck said. "Or the Wild East."

Those working the mountain use ice axes rather than pick axes, but most are there to scratch a living from the Earth's hide. They surround the goddess mountain with satellites, tie her down with ropes, and tame her with computer-analyzed weather reports.

And for every person who reaches Everest's summit, there are dozens more in Base Camp looking for a piece of the action.

For many climbers, money substitutes for the years of experience that used to get people up the mountain. These Everest climbers are business people, politicians and other dilettantes of adventure. Like George, most of them don't have long lists of peaks they have climbed or hope to climb in the future. Everest is the only mountain they want on their resume.

Each year they make the list of Everest superlatives -- first, youngest, oldest -- a little longer. Two climbers this year raced up the mountain, each trying to become the first Norwegian woman to summit. Two others hoped to drive the first golf ball off the peak, only to have their dreams spoiled when a perennial Everest guide announced that he had already clubbed a shot from the top, without fanfare, a few years earlier.

Aside from the guides and Sherpas, virtually every climber on Everest is paying his or her way to the top. Tens of thousands of dollars change hands here with virtually no legal oversight. And in this wilderness, money is like blood. It's sure to draw a few predators.

On the Tibet side of Everest, more than 15 miles from Base Camp and 12,000 feet higher, the summit fills the sky. I traced the route up the mountain's Northeast Ridge to the peak with my finger. Then I crawled into my tent and tried not to vomit.

George's electronics were also suffering. His laptop had died before we reached Base Camp, his generator proved unreliable, and his satellite phone was often out of order. In the U.S., George had delayed buying the phone for months until Anne ordered it for him a few days before we departed. In Katmandu, George couldn't get it to work, so Bill figured out how to set it up. Now, in Base Camp, the team quickly exhausted all the satellite time George had paid for. It took him a week to arrange for more time and get the phone working again.

"It will get better when we get to ABC [Advanced Base Camp]," Anne said.

Middle Camp, April 17

Climbing teams on the world's highest mountains move like yo-yos -- climbing up the mountain to set a new high point, spending a night or two there, then descending to recover from the effort and adjust to the thinner air. To acclimatize on Everest, most climbers will make one or two trips from Base Camp to Advanced Base Camp and back, before moving in at Advanced Base Camp. When they feel comfortable there, they make a round trip or two to Camp One, the first of the three high camps that lead to the summit. For their summit push, the climbers start from Advanced Base Camp, planning to spend a night each in Camp One, Camp Two and Camp Three. On their summit day, they start climbing before midnight in hopes of reaching the climb's most difficult section -- the aluminum ladder scaling a bluff called the Second Step -- around first light. By midmorning they should be standing on the summit in order to have enough time to descend to a lower camp in the afternoon.

The first hike to Advanced Base Camp and back is vital, both for the human body's acclimatization to the altitude and for the team's adjustment to climbing together. For most, Middle Camp is essential to that trip -- a rugged way station that breaks the 13-mile climb from the 17,000-foot Base Camp to the 21,500-foot Advanced Base Camp into two arduous but manageable parts.

But on the morning of the team's first hike up the mountain, we stood amid bedlam. Dozens of yaks arrived in small herds. Their drivers weighed our loads and haggled through the morning.

In Katmandu, Anne had reached a compromise with Dawa Sherpa over the number and cost of the yaks Asian Trekking was providing -- a deal that George resented. "Anne has stabbed us in the back," he said when the subject came up.

Now, as the yaks moved out, George and Lhakpa stayed in the cook tent while the rest of us struggled to make sense of the chaos.

Carolyn and I decided to ascend a day after our teammates and knew it was imperative to have a tent in Middle Camp. Lhakpa, the first to head up the hill, promised to leave one there for us.

But, my teammates reported later, the chaos only worsened in the intermediate camp. The first team members to hike up said that the Sherpas didn't set up their tents until late, and that there was little food and water. Few of the climbers could find their gear when the yaks delivered it at dusk.

By the time Carolyn and I completed the grueling hike to Middle Camp, late the next day, it was snowing hard. We stumbled over the hills that separate the 19,000-foot camp into clusters of tents but couldn't find our shelter. As night began to fall, Dan Mazur, an American expedition leader, took us in, fed us, and let us sleep in his dining tent.

"It's a shame, what's happening to your team," Mazur said. "Everest makes people grow horns."

When I continued up to Advanced Base Camp two days later, I ran into Chuck, Dave and Dan Lochner, descending. Chuck had vomited regularly since our arrival in Tibet. He could hide his illness lower on the mountain, but in Advanced Base Camp his swollen, listless face was impossible to miss. George sent him down. Dave and Dan were also sick and descended with him. When, in Middle Camp, Dave and Dan decided they didn't feel strong enough to continue descending, Chuck left them there with members of a Greek expedition. After he staggered into Base Camp, Carolyn expressed shock that he had left his friends behind.

She also complained about the missing Middle Camp tent. "This is a hard-core mountaineering expedition," Chuck responded. "If you can't hack it you shouldn't be here."

The next morning the Greeks fed Dave porridge with nuts that caused an allergic reaction. He, like Carolyn and I, sought help in Mazur's mess tent, where he recovered before completing his descent.

Staying healthy is a greater challenge than the climbing. Some mountain maladies are killers, like pulmonary edema, which drowns climbers in their own blood, and cerebral edema, which fills the skull with fluid. The only cure for these is getting to a lower elevation fast.

Other illnesses are just uncomfortable and inconvenient. Acute mountain sickness brings nausea and headaches to many climbers. Third World sanitation gives others water- and food-borne illnesses such as giardia and dysentery. And, in this oxygen-poor environment, even common colds and sore throats are guaranteed to get worse without a trip down or a round of antibiotics. On the final days of the climb to the summit, in the notorious "death zone" above 24,000 feet, most climbers will require tanks of oxygen to survive. But even these won't keep the mountain's hazards at bay for long.

Back in Base Camp, it was not the persistent illnesses and relentless cold, but boredom that caused the most discomfort. Books, stereos and countless trips to Hotel California passed the time as the climbers waited for their bodies to acclimatize. Computers provided e-mail during the day and action films on DVD at night: "Kill Bill: Vol. 1" at Russell Brice's camp; "Gladiator" at ours. Nobody brings romantic comedies to Everest. Beer flowed every afternoon. Vodka marked special occasions.

During an evening of drinking, George gave Chuck a blow-by-blow account of the tension and infighting that plagued the Romanian national expedition he climbed with in 2003. But it was talk of raiding other teams' caches of oxygen that troubled Chuck.

"This is the Connecticut Everest Expedition. This is my name and my reputation. We're not stealing oxygen," Chuck told Anne afterward.

But when the team returned to Advanced Base Camp, a few days later, Anne and Carolyn were surprised to hear Chuck say that there was plenty of oxygen and abandoned equipment in the higher camps, and that he would help himself to whatever he needed.

Although in dire circumstances climbers will take advantage of whatever resources they must to survive, most try to compensate the people whose supplies they use. Chuck had more than enough oxygen to get to the summit, and I still can't believe he would appropriate anything vital to the survival of other climbers. Still, his comments troubled both Anne and me.

When we drew names from a hat to determine which Sherpa would work for which climber, Chuck interrupted the ceremony.

"I want to talk about e-mail," he said.

George had repeatedly asked Carolyn and me to provide e-mail and satellite phone service to the team. He bristled when we responded that we didn't have enough resources for the whole team. Now Chuck chimed in.

Later, Bill called a meeting. "We've got to drop all this fighting," he said tersely, trying to end the bickering. "It's hurting the team."

Although George had told us he preferred to spend his time in the cook tent, most of us were surprised at how rarely he came into the dining tent where his teammates gathered, and that he shared none of our meals. But during the Buddhist ceremonies held to bless the team, George took center stage, kneeling beside the monk for the duration of the puja, while the other climbers gathered at a more respectful distance.

Lhakpa grew up Buddhist, but she attended none of the hours-long ceremonies and her absence made us uneasy. As we moved up the mountain, our co-leader was even more remote. She refused to wear sunglasses in the withering glare of sun on snow and was laid up snow blind when we moved in at Advanced Base Camp.

"I want to go down," I heard her arguing with George.

Advanced Base Camp, April 28

At 21,500 feet, Advanced Base Camp is higher than the summit of North America's loftiest peak. Bodies waste away during the weeks climbers wait for their bones to squeeze out enough red blood cells to make a few minutes of survival at the summit possible. Nothing heals. Exhaustion and cold isolated us in the sprawling, nylon city.

Carolyn and I spent our nights and much of our days buried in sleeping bags so big they seemed more like down caskets. We scratched notes into pads and tapped on keyboards until our fingers went numb, then shoved our wooden hands deep into the bags to bring them back to life.

During storms, winds coming off the summit sounded like trains, rumbling in the distance, then blasting through the camp. The snow and sub-zero temperatures were inconveniences. But the wind was a killer, turning snowflakes into needles and driving the cold deep into our bones. After the windstorms, climbers staggered through their sites to gather their shredded tents. Some camps looked like the debris fields from a tornado, full of snapped poles and tattered fabric, but with tables full of food left untouched.

Our tents survived the mountain weather, but the closer we moved to the summit, the more Everest seemed to tear at the fabric of the team.

"It's like `Survivor,'" Anne said. "With all the alliances."

"Or the `Lord of the Flies,'" Carolyn responded.

Walking past the cook tent, Bill overheard George showing off his new camera to Dan Lochner. He could afford it, Bill recalled George saying, because he didn't need to hire a Sherpa. He knew members of the Connecticut team weren't going to make it. He would use their Sherpas.

"It will get better when we start climbing," Anne said.

"Yeah," I responded. Sure. "It will get better when we get to the `death zone.'"

The Dans nicknamed their parlor-sized tent the "Pleasure Dome" for its music, Christmas lights and beer. Although women allegedly led the Connecticut team, a stack of pornographic magazines discouraged them from visiting what quickly became the expedition's most popular common area. So when the Dans invited not only me, but also Carolyn, into their Pleasure Dome, something was up.

When George's generator had broken down a few days earlier, we had asked the Dans if we could use theirs. Now they had decided against helping us.

"I can't see where you two have done anything for the Connecticut Everest Expedition," Dan Meggitt declared, a surprising statement considering neither of the Dans were a part of the expedition.

Until then, Carolyn and I had managed to file blogs or stories almost daily, even when one of our computers died and the other's battery failed. Now we were doomed to spend days hiking tent-to-tent to panhandle for the power to do our work.

George was the only other member of the Connecticut expedition in the tent when we were cut off from the generator. He sat with Guillermo on a cot and looked away when we glanced at him.

A few minutes later, as we told Anne and Bill about our predicament, Guillermo stuck his head into the dining tent to ask for Bill's credit card to pay for George's satellite phone fees. Bill stepped from the tent and we could hear him arguing with George.

"This expedition is a fraud," he said when he returned.

The following night, after dinner, Bill broke out a bottle of Canadian whiskey and broke the news. This was no longer a team he wanted to be a part of. He was going home. George and Lhakpa didn't find out Bill was leaving until he was ready to put his on pack early the next day.

The North Col, May 8

On most mornings in May, climbers on the steep headwalls atop the Rongbuk Glacier look like fence posts in the snow. Their movements uphill are almost imperceptible as they march a serpentine route through snowy slopes and ice cliffs to the North Col, a saddle-shaped dip in the North Ridge of Everest. At Camp One, atop the col, more than 50 red and yellow mountaineering tents were spread in rows atop the glacier like jewels on satin.

Anne and I took nearly seven hours to complete our first trip to the col. We were desperately out of breath throughout the frigid, strenuous, wind-blasted slog. It was the most fun we'd had since leaving the U.S.

"We're finally climbing," Anne said with a grin between gasps.

When I saw my wife upon returning to Advanced Base Camp, it suddenly struck me that she looked emaciated. Altitude sickness had her throwing up most of her meals, leaving her weak with hunger.

Eventually, my already slender wife would lose 25 pounds. Her hair fell out in clumps.

While I was at Camp One, Carolyn had spent her time alone in the dining tent. At lunch, Maila, the cook, brought her a plate with some coleslaw and two pieces of bread, meager rations compared with what the climbers were served. When she went to the cook tent to get more food, she was shocked to find Mingma serving himself a plateful of stew. She described the event in her blog.

"I want what everyone else is eating. Chicken, I don't care," Carolyn said to Maila.

Lhakpa followed her back to the dining tent.

"You want chicken, you must pay!" she insisted.

Maila returned to the dining tent with a smile and steaming servings of yak meat, rice and soup.

The broth went down OK, but Carolyn vomited the stew on top of the rest of her meal. For a few moments she considered forcing the whole mess back down her throat. Don't dogs do it all the time?

Instead, she dumped her plate into what she thought was a trash bag, but was actually a sack of food.

Maila's anger at finding the meal contaminating his provisions grew when he learned that much of it had already been eaten once.

George responded to Carolyn's blogs complaining about the rations in his own weblog, filed days later, in which he told of a party celebrating Lochner's 22nd birthday held while we were away, complete with "Jell-O shots" and a cake too big for the climbers to finish. His report appeared on Everestnews.com, a site devoted to ongoing reports from mountaineering expeditions. George has filed extensive reports to the site during his Everest climbs.

"Carolyn is a reporter with trekking permit, we cannot let our kitchen resources go to a person who has no ambition or right to climb this mountain," he wrote, after Carolyn complained that she couldn't find the cook and get a meal in Base Camp. "How unfair for her to claim that some how Asian Trekking should send a cook down and [leave] us climbers exposed with only one cook."

According to Dawa Sherpa at Asian Trekking, Carolyn's \$3,800 permit paid for her food and the services of the cook.

Anne and I had other problems with food.

Our Sherpas, Dawa Nuru and Mingma, had surprised us the morning we left for the North Col by requiring \$200 each to buy the food they would eat in the high camps -- more than twice what we had already spent on high-altitude food. Although we had bought enough to feed them too, our provisions didn't suit their tastes.

We asked them to wait a day for the money so we could complete our climb to Camp One, but when we returned, they announced they were quitting. To stay with us, they demanded that we not only pay for their high-altitude food -- we gave them \$100 each -- but also fork over more than \$1,600 each for work they had yet to complete, tips they normally wouldn't receive until the end of the expedition.

"You guys just need to develop a personal relationship with your Sherpa," said Dave, who had never before climbed with a Sherpa but was now using the one that Bill had hired.

I thought it unlikely that the Sherpas we paid more than \$6,000 to hire and equip would abandon us because we weren't pals. But the morning after Anne and I agreed to our Sherpas' demands, Lhakpa ordered Mingma, her brother, to dump Anne's gear out of his pack.

"You no help Anna," Lhakpa shouted.

Mingma pulled some of the gear from his pack but in the end carried it to Camp One.

In the days before our climb to the North Col, Anne had watched as Lhakpa, who had rarely carried a pack herself, checked the bags carried by friends and family working for other expeditions. Lhakpa coaxed those whose packs seemed light to carry some of her gear. When Anne ended up carrying some of her own equipment, she wondered aloud whose gear Mingma, the Sherpa she was paying, had in his pack.

"Anne, you a big mouth," Lhakpa said when she heard of Anne's comments. "You no want Everest. Go home."

The Pleasure Dome, May 9

"I'm going to sue you or I am going to whack you!" George screamed when I stuck my head into the Pleasure Dome.

George had been unable to read my stories and Carolyn's blogs when his computer broke down. But, since reconnecting to the Internet with Dan Lochner's computer the day before, he had been raging about them. Carolyn and I had planned to hike to Base Camp in hopes that the richer air would help Carolyn get over her nausea and heal my sore throat. As we prepared to descend, we heard George boasting of the ways he could "make an accident" happen to us.

"I'm going to burn their tent down!" he shouted.

Before we headed down, I stopped at the Pleasure Dome, both to offer George the chance to air his grievances in my next news story and to find out if it would be safe for me to rejoin the climbing team when I returned to Advanced Base Camp.

The squabble lasted nearly four hours. George bragged that he had most of the residents of our camp working against me. Chuck and Dave's change of heart about technology and demands for e-mail, he said, came from him. Guillermo said that, when I loaned George our satellite phone for an emergency call to Katmandu, he dialed through the device's menus to check the numbers we had called. George claimed that he sent Dan Lochner to eavesdrop on the phone calls Carolyn and I made from our tent and that Lochner and Meggitt had secretly videotaped us when they told us they were cutting us off from power.

Meggitt asked to videotape the argument while it was raging, but an uneasy truce developed before he got his camera set up. George agreed to let us use his repaired generator.

I asked George about the conversation Bill overheard about taking other climbers' Sherpas. He replied that climbers who turned back surely would let their resources go to the good of the team, wouldn't they?

Outside, Carolyn and Anne sat with Lhakpa, whom they had not talked to in weeks. When they asked if George had forbidden her to talk to us, her eyes filled with tears. She changed the subject.

Carolyn and I descended to Base Camp the following morning. Anne, hoping to clear a bad cough, came down a day later. We would need to stay at Middle Camp on our hike back up, so we all checked on the tent we left there when we passed by. It was missing again.

Base Camp, May 11

Russell Brice, an Everest legend who has been climbing in the Himalayas for 30 years, 10 of them running commercial expeditions to Everest, wanted to talk to me in Base Camp. Last year, on his 13th Everest expedition, all his clients reached the summit. This year more than 100 people lived in his tents, which spread out in long rows like a suburban subdivision.

In the frontier town that is Everest Base Camp, Brice is something akin to Wyatt Earp. Not everyone agrees with the rules he and the rest of the mountain's most experienced guides impose, but they're the only order high on the mountain.

He had problems with our expedition, and George in particular.

"He's cheating you guys," Brice said, sitting amid memorials to fallen climbers on a hill above his camp.

"He organizes an expedition and doesn't take responsibility."

Brice was getting cheated, too, he said. While we prided ourselves on climbing without guides, he said we were really just parasites feeding off the work and resources of bigger expeditions.

Each year, Brice hosts a meeting in Advanced Base Camp to determine what each expedition will contribute toward installing the ropes that are critical to the safety of all the climbers on the mountain. But George led us down to Base Camp the day before this year's meeting. We didn't hear about the meeting for nearly a week.

George doesn't do his part on the mountain, Brice said.

This year, the expeditions that did contribute only managed to fix ropes up to Camp Three, the last camp before the summit. Brice had enough rope to equip the summit, but wouldn't put them up until his clients were climbing. Those who went for the summit earlier would hang on old and dangerously tattered lines. He said our expedition was causing problems lower on the mountain, too. One of our cooks was sent down alone to Base Camp when he became altitude sick. Friends who found him in our cook tent three days later were convinced he was dying.

"The kitchen boy was sent down with no support and no medicine," Brice charged. "I used two bottles of oxygen to care for [him]. Am I ever going to get that back from George?"

Experience made him confident he could forecast our future.

"You're going to run out of food," he said, predicting as well that the shortage of provisions would end some climbers' chances for the summit prematurely.

"He probably didn't tell you about the tip structure for the Sherpas' trips to high camps," Brice added. When we told Brice that George had each climber who wanted help from a Sherpa hire one individually, he was flabbergasted. "That's not how you do it," he said incredulously. "You hire your Sherpas as a team."

Brice said that when he first came to Everest, climbers banded together and helped each other out. Today, he said, many hide to avoid responsibility or lurk in the shadows to exploit other teams.

"These people are in my tents, in my sleeping bags, using my gas and eating my food," Brice said.

Brice has had oxygen bottles stolen and tents filled with crucial equipment thrown from the mountain.

"I drop oxygen at Camp Three and you come and take it and it's not there for my client," Brice said. "That's manslaughter."

His tents were once open to any climber desperate for a port in a storm. These days there are locks on the doors.

Back at our site in Base Camp, our missing Middle Camp tent turned up in a sack in the team's supply tent.  
Advanced Base Camp, May 16

I knew the team would start its summit bid as soon as Carolyn, Anne and I returned to Advanced Base Camp. The weather was shaky and the ropes to the summit were tattered. A better weather window was predicted a few days later. Although the rest of the climbers had been resting for weeks, Anne and I were exhausted after the two-day climb from Base Camp. But George and Dawa Nuru had selected May 20 as the Connecticut expedition's summit day, and I knew nothing would change their plans. The climb to the top would take four days. As soon as Anne and I arrived in Advanced Base Camp, late in the afternoon, Chuck told us to get our gear ready for the summit push.

Early the next morning, George sat at the head of the dining tent table. Lhakpa stood behind him. It was the only team meeting he organized. Although the Connecticut expedition had never climbed as a team, George insisted we would go to the summit as one.

"I just want to know, if someone turns back, whether they will allow their Sherpa to work for the team?" Dave asked.

Of course we would, and we'd said it before -- when George had asked.

The meeting had hardly started when the Dans, who had started climbing the day before, called George from Camp One. They both had connected their first bottles of oxygen to their masks incorrectly and blown out the seals on the masks. They overcame that problem, however, and would reach the summit two days later.

Camp Two, May 18

It took me six hours to climb the snow slope from Camp One, at 23,500 feet, to the lowest reaches of Camp Two, about 2,000 feet higher. Anne was 15 minutes behind me. More than 30 climbers marched single file between the two camps on Everest's North Ridge. Fixed ropes hung like banister rails along a staircase of steps hardened in the snow by hundreds of boots. Ice axes were little more than canes. The ropes prevented anyone from having to stop a fall with their ax, or pull their partner from a crevasse. Success here was a triumph of physiology rather than mountaineering skill.

And in this world, George and Lhakpa's strength was obvious. They stayed so far in front of the pack that I wasn't sure which figures on the landscape were theirs. Chuck was about 20 minutes ahead of Anne and me throughout the climb. He would sit on the snow and look back at us between the grueling, tedious slogs up the slope. Dave climbed with Chuck early, but moved well in front of him at the top of the slope. Anne and I spent no time with our teammates above Advanced Base Camp.

Sometimes I could rally 20 steps in a row, but usually only four or five, before leaning on my ax and panting. Our pace seemed strong in the morning, but by afternoon, the previous three days' climbs were taking their toll. Most of the other climbers passed us. Hristo Hristov, a Bulgarian mountaineer who fed Anne tea and honey and chatted during a rest stop on the previous day's climb, could only nod to us as he passed. Shoka Ota, a 63-year-old Japanese woman, was close behind him in line.

"It was like we've run four marathons in a row," said Anne, a veteran of eight marathons.

We arrived at the lowest tents of Camp Two just before 2 p.m. knowing that it was going to be a brutal struggle to climb the remaining 1,300 feet over steep, rocky ground to our own campsite. In good conditions, that last scramble takes two hours.

The wind was gusting hard enough to make us stumble, and ominous clouds swirled around the peak. Nearby, a climber crawled on his hands and knees toward the craggy ridgeline. Chuck sat on the rocks above looking down on us, then crept away and vanished.

We had been at the tents for 20 minutes when our Sherpas, Dawa Nuru and Mingma, arrived. It was the first we had seen of them since we'd left Advanced Base Camp.

"You must go up," they said. "Or go down."

In the end, the math was simple.

Five years earlier, Anne and I had been 22,000 feet high on a Himalayan peak when a guide from another expedition fell into a huge crevasse. It took us two hours to pull the injured climber out, and although we still managed to summit that day, we cut it closer than either of us likes to remember.

We were probably strong enough to climb to the top of Everest and back. But we were not convinced that we could battle through a storm or recover from an accident. And we weren't sure which of our teammates we could trust to help us.

George had promised each climber would get a second chance, but I knew that was a long shot. We retreated in silence, lone figures stumbling down the now-empty ridgeline.

Anne seemed on the verge of tears as we fell into the tent. I felt 20 years older than when I'd arrived in Nepal.

The next morning Mingma and Dawa Nuru visited us for a few minutes, then climbed back up the mountain to rejoin the team.

Two days later, on May 20, George, Lhakpa, Chuck and Dave reached the top of the world along with the expedition's four Sherpas. They were the first to reach the summit among some 50 climbers who made the attempt that day. Whiteout conditions blocked their view of the curved Earth below, but not of the ragged ropes that threatened to drop them into the void, or the dead and dying climbers along the route. The dead are often left where they fall.

After Dawa Nuru radioed from the summit, I filed my story from Advanced Base Camp. It ran on The Courant's front page, under the headline "Expedition Triumphs."

The team members had climbed well on their final push, but they best distinguished themselves as athletes by how quickly they descended. Few climbers make it all the way to Advanced Base Camp the same day they summit, but the entire Connecticut team was back there within 12 hours of reaching the top.

On his return, George cited the worst conditions he had encountered in his six trips to the top of Everest. Russell Brice should have completed fixing the ropes, he said. Many Sherpas who did fix ropes did it poorly.

Shoka Ota, the Japanese woman who passed Anne and I near Camp Two, topped out the same day as the Connecticut team, the oldest woman to ever reach the summit. But descending the Second Step, she fell. She died dangling from a rope there. Hristo Hristov, exhausted from his climb to the summit without oxygen, died just above the step a few hours later.

Advanced Base Camp, May 21

For 36 hours there was no sign of Guillermo. The Mexican camped with the Connecticut team but climbed without supplemental oxygen and summited hours later. Nobody expected him to make it back to Advanced Base Camp the same day he reached the summit.

The next day, though, he was one of several climbers from various expeditions who were unaccounted for in the deteriorating weather.

"If he doesn't come down tomorrow, he's dead," George said.

"Maybe we see him next year," Mingma added darkly.

All of the Sherpas but Mingma returned to Camp One to begin breaking down the team's gear.

Chuck, Dave and I gathered medications to send up with them. Sherpas got a quick lesson about how to inject adrenalin into a climber's leg. Anne visited other expeditions to see what they knew of Guillermo.

Later George asked her to take him to Brice's camp.

"I normally wouldn't help you," Anne recalled Brice telling George. "But this is a human life."

The next morning, Brice made a rare appearance at the Connecticut site. One of his Sherpas had found Guillermo in a tent at Camp Three, making tea. He had a bit of frostbite, but Brice was convinced he could make it down on his own.

Dave Pritt, a British guide, also visited us. He was in the Pleasure Dome early in the afternoon when George radioed our Sherpas in Camp One and ordered them to climb up to assist Guillermo. They hadn't brought warm enough clothes, they responded, and the weather was bad. They stopped answering the radio.

"Guillermo no need a rescue," Lhakpa said angrily. "Guillermo a lazy boy. My people can die up there, too."

George asked Pritt to send his Sherpas to help.

"You know, George, I've only just met you today, but I've heard the stories, many stories about you being unwilling to help others," Pritt said. "Now you come with a guy in your group that needs help and people say, 'Why should we help George?'"

Pritt's climbers, still in high camps, needed his Sherpas, but he loaned Anne a pair of radios. The ones Chuck provided for the team didn't work, so we borrowed others from whomever we could.

George began radioing offers of money to our Sherpas. A promise of \$5,000 prompted Ang Mingma (no relation to Lhakpa's brother Mingma Sherpa) and Dawa Nuru to help Guillermo. They found him late that afternoon, still in the tent at Camp Three where Brice's Sherpas had seen him.

Ang Mingma cursed him loudly for causing their stormbound trek through the "death zone" while he napped. The Sherpas strapped an oxygen mask onto Guillermo, Ang Mingma said, and the Mexican walked down unassisted while the Sherpas stripped gear from the mountain.

It was well after dark -- nearly 12 hours after Brice's Sherpas had found Guillermo -- when George decided to join the rescue. He radioed Ang Mingma with orders to continue descending through the night rather than stop at Camp One, where Guillermo and the Sherpas could have safely spent the night. He was coming to lead them down in the darkness.

Before departing he marched through camp calling out for down coats, headlamps, batteries and thermoses and cursing those who couldn't provide what he wanted.

"Do you want him to die?" he shouted.

At 7:30 p.m., George, Dave and Dan Lochner headed out.

Three hours later the summit-weary climbers were halfway back up the North Col. Dave, a ski patroller, mountain guide, and the only person there with search and rescue training, watched as Dan Lochner, one of the least experienced climbers on the mountain, crawled up the snow-loaded slope on his hands and knees. He could hear avalanches letting loose on the slopes nearby.

Chuck, also a search and rescue professional, refused to go.

"[George] put three people in danger at night on an avalanche-prone slope when Guillermo wasn't really in danger and could have stayed another night at the North Col," he said.

Dave, Dan and George never made it to Camp One; they waited on the ropes below the 23,500-foot camp for the Sherpas to escort Guillermo down. The next morning the weather began to clear, as Brice's weather report had predicted. We had 10 days left on our climbing permit, but the last hope Anne and I had of standing atop Everest died the next morning as another of Brice's predictions came true.

"There is no more food," George announced.

In reality, I knew there was little chance that I would take another shot at the summit. I'd had trouble breathing since my first attempt. Even the hike to Base Camp was excruciating.

Base Camp, May 24

Two days after Guillermo's descent, we woke up in Base Camp to gaze at a perfect summit day. Russell Brice's Sherpas fixed ropes a few feet in front of the first of his 19 clients who reached the top. Four Italians, climbing without oxygen, spent two hours conducting experiments at the peak.

But while it was clear and calm on top of Everest, a furor was erupting in Base Camp.

Anne, Carolyn and I were at the Italian camp when we heard Lhakpa's screams late that afternoon. George, Guillermo and Dan Lochner had just sat down in the dining tent after descending from Advanced Base Camp. Lhakpa followed them into the tent. When we got there, Maila, our cook, was pulling her from the tent. Lhakpa was shrieking and held a softball-size rock in her hand.

In the cook tent, the rest of the team tried to calm Lhakpa. "But I must fight," she argued, eyes brimming with tears. "I want to fight. I kill this man."

She said she wanted a divorce. Dave offered a haven with his family. After an hour Lhakpa went to visit the bathroom. But we soon heard her in the dining tent again.

"I want a divorce," she screamed. "She's my daughter, too."

George shouted vulgarities and insults back at her.

Anne stepped inside the door. But before she could persuade Lhakpa, who didn't hold a rock this time, to leave, she saw George hook a blow with his right hand into the side of his wife's head. The rest of the Connecticut team saw Lhakpa crumple onto the rocky ground just inside the door. She cried hysterically as George grabbed the scruff of her coat. I took a photograph and George dropped Lhakpa to come at me.

"You trigger happy?" he shouted. "I'll smash that camera on your head."

Lhakpa fell unconscious just inside the tent.

"She's crazy," Guillermo said, throwing his arms in the air when Anne asked for help.

Dan Lochner sat at the table with his hat pulled down low and his head in his hands.

"I'll show you how to get this piece of garbage out of here," George shouted, grabbing his unconscious wife and throwing her onto the rocks outside.

Carolyn, Anne and Chuck carried Lhakpa to the cook tent. We could hear George's bellowed curses while we tried to revive Lhakpa, who convulsed. Carolyn ran for help, and within a few minutes Italian mountaineers and doctors filled the tent. The cooks stepped around the clustered climbers to finish making dinner.

Maila moved Lhakpa to his personal tent when she revived.

At dinner in the cook tent, Carolyn put her open pocketknife on the table. "Just in case I have to cut my way out of this tent," she said. "If it catches on fire or anything."

George, Dan Lochner and Guillermo ate in the dining tent, then went to a teahouse for the night.

When the rest of us finally retired, I regretted leaving my ice axes in Advanced Base Camp. Anne took ski poles into her tent. Carolyn slept with her knife in her hand.

"I'm afraid that he'll just come back in the middle of the night, pick up a boulder and throw it on one of our tents," Anne said.

In the middle of the sleepless night I heard Carolyn whispering.

"I'm so scared ..."

Base Camp, May 25

At breakfast, Chuck's eyes were bloodshot and swollen. He was disturbed by what he had witnessed the day before. He said he had confronted domestic abuse at other times in his life and said, "I won't tolerate that. It's unacceptable to me."

But when George returned to camp at mid-morning, Chuck and Dave followed him into the dining tent. George emerged every so often with his cap pulled down to the top of his sunglasses and his scarf pulled up to his nose. He lowered the facemask to puff cigarettes. We had never seen him smoke before. He stalked outside the tents glaring at Anne, Carolyn and me, occasionally training his camera on us. When the women stared back he grabbed his crotch or flipped them off.

"Darth Vader in Adidas," Anne said.

The Chinese liaison officer arrived in a jeep, and George followed him into the cook tent.

"Who are the journalists?" the officer demanded.

"Those two," George said, pointing as Carolyn and I raised our hands. "They are the journalists."

Chuck and Dave gathered outside the cook tent to watch.

The officer said he had heard we were writing about the political situation in Tibet and reporting unconfirmed deaths on the mountain, although he declined to say from whom he had heard this. Anne stepped in to say she was the leader and vouched that I was a climber with the expedition and only wrote of our own experiences. The officer was satisfied, but showed on his paperwork that George, who had nominated Anne and Lhakpa as the expedition's leaders, was listed as leader.

The jeeps to Nepal showed up an hour after the liaison officer left.

The four-hour ride to Tingri was punishing, but it hadn't worn George down.

"She's a ... journalist!" he shouted, pointing out Carolyn and her video camera to bewildered Chinese workers in the town where we stopped for the night. "You want to take a picture of me with my pants down?"

The next day, at a Chinese border town, a waiter led us to the table where the last team meal was served. None of the Connecticut expedition joined George, Guillermo and Dan Lochner at the table. When I came to fill my bowl, George bounced a pair of chopsticks off my chest.

"Ask permission, you animal!" he demanded under his breath.

The venom in his voice was frightening, and I was thankful he was armed only with chopsticks.

He didn't speak to me again for five months.

At the border, Carolyn and I were again questioned by authorities who had heard we were journalists.

George and Lhakpa hired separate cars and raced down the rough-hewn mountain roads to Katmandu.

"I thought they were going to start ramming each other," said Chuck, who was riding with Lhakpa.

"Last year as well," Dawa Sherpa said when Anne told him our story the next morning. "It has happened before."

The Romanian Expedition, 2003

David Neacsu worked for seven years to put together the first Romanian expedition to Everest in 2003.

George's previous successes on Everest and his Romanian heritage prompted Neacsu to pay his and

Lhakpa's expenses to join the team, as well as those of Lhakpa's young sister, Doni.

I sought out Neacsu to ask him about his expedition. My only surprise was how familiar the story sounded.

"The person whom I had been e-mailing for more than 6 months proved to be somebody else in the mountains," Neacsu wrote back in an e-mail. George told the Sherpas and other expeditions that he was the expedition's leader, Neacsu wrote, "telling the people other things than what I had asked ... turning my people against me."

"Dijmarescu sent to some journalists in Romania an e-mail ... telling many untrue things about me (that I did not want the expedition to succeed, that I was sending people to death, that I was a liar and a thief ... )," Neacsu wrote. "All the newspapers were talking only about the Romanians that were fighting on Everest." The e-mail, which was published in a Romanian magazine, has George saying he wrote it on a handheld computer with a toothpick. But when Neacsu confronted him, he said, George denied writing it at all.

When Neacsu developed heart trouble in Advanced Base Camp, forcing him to descend to Base Camp and climb no higher, George stepped in.

"George was acting like the tyrannical leader," Sebastian Koga, the team's doctor, said in a telephone interview this summer.

Coco Galescu, the Romanians' strongest climber, questioned George's authority in Advanced Base Camp, Koga recalled, and George lunged over the dining-tent table at him. Galescu fell onto the rocky ground with George on top of him.

Koga recalled George threatening others who might stand against him. "You don't know what happens at night and I have this ice ax," Koga quoted George as saying. He remembered thinking to himself, "These tents have very thin walls. What if he does come after me?"

Galescu was injured but hid it, hoping he could still make the summit.

"He was wheezing badly and basically breathing out of one lung," said Koga, who climbed with Galescu until the injuries forced Galescu to descend from 24,000 feet.

In Katmandu, an X-ray revealed two broken ribs had caused fluid to fill one of Galescu's lungs. In a telephone call and an e-mail this summer, Galescu confirmed Koga's recollection of the events.

Lhakpa's sister Doni was 15 and had no mountaineering experience when George led her into the "death zone" on Everest.

"It took 1 1/2 hours to take her over the Second Step," Russell Brice said. "Thirty to 40 people had to turn around. That is incredibly selfish."

George joined the retreating climbers, reporting problems with his oxygen mask.

But the family of Sherpas continued upward. That morning Doni became the youngest person to climb Everest. Lhakpa set the record for ascents by a woman. With Mingma, they were the first trio of siblings to summit together. But when they returned to Camp Two that afternoon, George was less than congratulatory, Koga said.

Doni, exhausted and inexperienced, stepped over a piece of George's down gear with her crampons on, Koga said.

"He hit Doni right in front of me. It was a back-handed, nasty slap," said Koga, a neurologist who has worked with head trauma patients at a Katmandu hospital, studied the effects of abuse in Romanian orphanages, and is now studying at Tulane University in New Orleans.

(In late October, when asked for his side of the story, George denied hitting Doni or injuring Galescu. He would not talk further on the record about the Romanian expedition. But in his e-mail to the Romanian press last year, he suggested Neacsu's inexperience on Everest and fragile emotional state had jeopardized the health and safety of the rest of the team.)

Koga cited other parallels to the Connecticut expedition.

"The Sherpas demanded more money off us after having behaved really horribly," Koga said. "Dijmarescu and his Sherpas abused the hell out of us."

After they were paid, Koga said, the Sherpas climbed with George and Lhakpa and left behind members of the Romanian team who didn't keep up.

Later, George asked Koga to join him for another attempt at the summit.

"I was honestly afraid that if something went wrong he could turn homicidal," Koga said.

In the meantime, Lhakpa asked Neacsu to take her and her sister away from Everest, the expedition leader reported. "On the same day I received a phone call from Dijmarescu asking for my help. He needed money for his second attempt. I gave him money and let him use the oxygen that remained ... many of them he sold to Russell Brice -- in order to get money to pay the Sherpas."

Brice said he doesn't know if his team bought oxygen from George but said the value of oxygen has made the bottles popular with thieves. He said he no longer purchases secondhand oxygen.

As George began his second attempt on the mountain, his wife, her siblings and the rest of the Romanian expedition and Sherpas were making their way back to Katmandu. On the day George made his way to Camp Three, Lhakpa and Doni had their photo taken with Sir Edmund Hillary at a party commemorating the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of the mountain.

But the Romanian team's successes were overshadowed in their homeland by the tensions on the team.

"It was the first attempt by the Romanian government to fully sponsor an expedition. We [had] met the president and the prime minister. We were doing it right," Koga said. "It kind of destroyed climbing in Romania, all this negative press."

"[George] is a menace ... a real sadist with delusions of grandeur, intemperate ambition, poor judgment and endless egotism," Koga wrote to me in an e-mail. "He is the very embodiment of everything that is unacceptable and dangerous in a mountaineering teammate. He uses intrigue, rumor-spreading, and manipulation to divide a group and take power over them."

Katmandu, May 27

By the time we arrived in Katmandu, more bad news was coming from Everest. Russell Brice, fed up with climbers helping themselves to his equipment and supplies, sent his Sherpas to strip his ropes and ladders from the mountain as soon as his clients came down from the summit. Everestnews.com reported dozens of other climbers and Sherpas were stranded in high camps or endangered in their summit bids. No casualties, however, were reported due to the situation.

When our luggage from the mountain arrived at our hotel, Carolyn and I discovered the locks had been pried off the barrels and duffel bags. A tent and a bag of unused film were taken. In all, nine of the Connecticut team's 13 tents, which retail for \$500 each, were missing. In addition, all 10 bottles of oxygen Anne and I had planned to use high on the mountain, which cost \$410 each, were unaccounted for. Anne calmly listed the missing gear and the expedition's troubles to Dawa Sherpa at Asian Trekking. But she trembled with anger when she saw the banner associating the team she had worked so hard to bring to the Himalayas with the man whose volatility she believed shattered it.

A few days later, Carolyn and I ran into Lhakpa at the Nepali department of immigration, where she was trying to arrange travel papers for Mingma, her brother, to accompany her and George to Pakistan for the K2 climb. But the climb wouldn't come off, she admitted, if she couldn't convince the king, or someone else in the Nepali government, to fund it.

"George says I must push harder," she said.

Eighty years ago, George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine disappeared on Everest's northeast ridge. It seems perversely appropriate that the Connecticut expedition's route remains best known for that fatal, if glorious, failure, despite the hundreds of successful ascents since. Most of the climbers on our permit, even those who summited, were also robbed of their dreams.

Guillermo's descent on oxygen deprived him of credit for climbing to the summit without it.

Dan Lochner successfully climbed Everest but still needed to reach the summit of Mount Vinson in Antarctica to fulfill his quest to be the youngest person to climb the "Seven Summits." His dream was spoiled by another climber from Connecticut -- Britton Keeshan, then 22, of Greenwich, who completed his climbs to the continental high points when he summited Everest from the south a few days after Lochner. Lochner's partner, Dan Meggitt, is also crestfallen. "I thought it would be more glamorous," said Meggitt, who once sailed solo around the world. "I thought there would be more climbing involved."

It took the better part of a month for the fractured team, traveling alone or in pairs, to make their way back to Connecticut.

Hartford, Summer

George and Lhakpa's K2 climb never got off the ground. They returned to Hartford together in mid-June.

Lhakpa has not commented for this story. And I know she will never read it.

She and George joined Chuck and Dave to drop in on Connecticut's new governor, M. Jodi Rell, during a stop she made in Bristol in July. Although the governor's appearance was just a few miles from Anne's home, they didn't invite her, Bill or me to the event. Chuck, however, did invite us to the photo session they arranged for the following week with Rell and the Connecticut flag George had carried to the summit.

Two days later, Chuck called Anne complaining that an anonymous caller had tipped the governor's staff to the expedition's troubles, and the photo opportunity was off. But Anne's call to the Capitol was far from anonymous. She had left her name and phone number in case anyone there had any questions about what happened to us in the Himalayas.

"For me, it was just another route," Dave said when I spoke with him months later. Like the other climbers who reached the summit, he was eager to put the expedition's problems behind him. "The mountain does strange things to people."

Late last month in The Burlington (Vt.) Free Press, Dave said he was planning to return to Everest with George in March 2005, to attempt the last unclimbed ridge on the mountain's eastern side.

By the time the rest of us had returned to the U.S., Bill had also decided to go back to Everest. He doesn't like unfinished business and has spoken with Anne and I about returning to Tibet together to do Everest right. He is still torn about abandoning his first attempt. He knows it was the right move for him, but wonders if had he stayed, whether the expedition would have gone better for Anne and me.

Anne had trouble sleeping during the summer, but had a new field hockey team at Trinity to occupy her in the fall. Her once close friendship with Chuck is beyond repair. Especially considering what happened on their last night in Base Camp, she said, "That he is willing to set himself up to profit by turning a blind eye to somebody else's suffering is unconscionable."

Chuck tried to turn his success on the mountain into financial success for his guiding business and slide shows, which he and Dave now market under the name the Connecticut Everest Experience.

"I just want to bask in the glory of this happening and make some of my money back," Chuck told me after returning home. That will be difficult, he said, if the expedition's troubles come out.

With the expedition's total cost in the neighborhood of \$100,000, money was bound to breed resentment. Anne and Bill brought in most of the team's financing and material support but benefited little from their work. That the four expedition members who summited raised just a fraction of what got the team there still rankles.

Chuck and George continue to resent that The Courant paid both my salary and expenses during the trip. George threatened to sue for more of the team's money in a lengthy e-mail he sent the team in early June. But that is the least of his threats. The night before her departure from Katmandu, Anne referred to Dan Lochner and Guillermo as the "Hitler youth" for their loyalty to George despite his volatility. Although George's hostility toward Anne had been building for months, his belief that she called him "Hitler" is the grievance he latched onto.

"... I will make you regret those comments," he addressed her in the e-mail to the team, "you better believe I know how I can do it to harm your career."

Two weeks after Carolyn and I returned from the Himalayas, as we jogged up our street, George watched us from one of my neighbor's yards, where he was visiting a customer of his home improvement company. I realized that I had turned back from my climb of Mount Everest only to have the greatest peril I encountered on the mountain follow me home. For much of the summer, I was mired in the same struggles I was on Everest.

Chuck visited mutual friends to tell his side of the story. Acquaintances in the local climbing community picked sides. The publisher of a mountaineering website requested that The Courant take me off the story, claiming he had veteran mountaineers to discredit my reporting.

But most disturbing were the phone messages Anne and I received from a woman who had met George and Lhakpa before the expedition. Lhakpa had told her that in 2005, she was organizing an all-women Connecticut expedition. George would work for them as a Sherpa. The caller was ready to sign up. And I remembered George's final words on Everestnews.com describing the Connecticut Everest Expedition's climb to the summit.

"Six summits in six consecutive attempts," he wrote at the end of his report, before offering his services.

"Do you need a guide for Mount Everest?"