



Longtime Back Bay resident becomes first US woman to summit dangerous K2

By Sophia Eppolito

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On her third attempt in as many years, Vanessa O'Brien became the first American woman to summit K2, the world's second tallest mountain and one of the deadliest.

"You have to have a reason for going. For me it was a sense of national pride," said O'Brien, 52, a longtime Back Bay resident who recently relocated to New York. "I wanted to be the first American woman. For me, it was so important to show that I could."

At 28,251 feet, K2 is only 778 feet shorter than Mount Everest, but it is considered to be a far more daunting climb.

"It's shaped just like a triangle, the way a child would draw a mountain," said O'Brien, who reached the summit on July 28. "But most mountains aren't shaped that way. They're jagged and haphazard. [B]ut ... from a mountaineering perspective, it is the prize because it's so hard."

The first woman summited K2 in 1986. While 60 women have gone into space as astronauts, only 20 women have stood at the summit of the unforgiving peak many climbers know as "Savage Mountain."

K2, located on the China-Pakistan border, is known for having an otherwise unheard of summit-to-death ratio of 4-to-1. Fewer than 400 people have summited the peak and roughly 85 have died. Everest, by contrast, has been summited by more than 4,000 people.

It took O'Brien's "dream team" of 12 experienced climbers 16 hours to reach the summit from Camp 4 -- a combined round trip of 23 hours. O'Brien's expedition was the first to summit the mountain since 2014.

In just [five years of climbing](#), O'Brien scaled four of the world's 14 tallest mountains, conquered Everest, and set a world record as the fastest woman to climb the highest peaks on all seven continents — a feat known as the Seven Summits — in just 295 days.

[O'Brien's first attempt at K2 came in 2015](#) when she joined an expedition with Madison Mountaineering, a boutique mountain guide service based in Seattle. The mountain guide service charges \$58,500 for a K2 expedition, according to its site.

It takes six to eight weeks to reach the summit and climbers must pass through Camps 1 through 4 before they attempt to summit. That first year, O'Brien's team was only able to reach Camp 2 before they had to turn around.

In addition to the typical perils of K2, like avalanches and extreme weather, O'Brien's expedition had to avoid falling rocks that had become dislodged during an unseasonably warm El Niño year. Two of the climbers were hurt and had to be rescued.

"I knew when we came home that I had to go back, but I also knew when I went back that I would have to lead my own expedition," O'Brien said. "I knew to climb something like K2, I would have to take more risks."

O'Brien's second attempt on K2 in 2016 was thwarted by an avalanche after her expedition made it to Camp 3. "That was just completely gut-wrenching," she said.

O'Brien returned for her third attempt during the summer of 2017. The entire climb took 67 days with an average of eight hours of climbing each day. The expedition included seven climbers; seven sherpas, or skilled local mountain guides; four kitchen staff; 350 low-altitude porters who carry equipment to basecamp; and nine tons of equipment.

After graduating from New York University Stern School of Business, O'Brien worked her way up in the financial services industry as an executive at Bank of America, Barclays, and Morgan Stanley, in the United States and the United Kingdom.

She took up mountain climbing after leaving the industry in the midst of the recession, O'Brien [told the Globe in 2013](#). When she lived in Boston, O'Brien lived on Marlborough Street near the Public Garden.

This year's K2 expedition presented its own dangers.

"You're sacrificing everything to get there again," O'Brien said. "As I suspected, it took additional risk because as we were going up, the weather was not good and ... it could have avalanched. I was hoping that at some point the snow would stop."

At the summit of K2, O'Brien clasped the United Nations flag and beamed with pride.

"I wanted to take the UN flag up for women to show how far have women come," she said. "And what better way to do it than to shout from a mountain top?"

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Correction: An earlier verison of this story gave an incorrect description of how deadly K2 is for climbers. It is one of the deadliest mountains.

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