

I. Note to Teachers

Erik Weihenmayer is the most celebrated blind athlete in the world. A high school and college wrestler, paraglider, skier, scuba diver, adventure racer, ice and rock-climber, and mountaineer. He is the only blind person to summit Mt. Everest, Mt. McKinley, Aconcagua, Vinson Massif, Kilimanjaro, Carstensz Pyramid and Mt. Elbrus, all of which make up the Seven Summits. The story of his achievements will inspire readers of all ages, especially middle and high school students eagerly wondering how far they too are capable of climbing. His autobiography is perfectly suited for use in an English or language arts classroom, depending on the reading level and maturity of the class.

Erik's story will affect students for reasons other than his impressive accomplishments, for the road to his extraordinary actions is paved with loss, fear, doubt, and the severe limitations of others' expectations. As a child and teenager, his life was darkened both literally and emotionally by the loss of his sight and by his mother's death. Many of his greatest accomplishments have been preceded by failure. Throughout his life he has had to maintain his dreams and visions despite the attitudes of those who believed no blind person could do what he dreamed of doing. His story is filled with passages students can not only discuss as remarkable experiences, but also apply to their own lives. Filled with pain, humor, doubt, and ultimately triumph, his journey serves as powerful testimony to the supreme strength of the human spirit and can inspire all students, sighted as well as blind, able as well as challenged, to dream of touching the tops of their own mountains.

Erik's life story divides into three phases. The first section of the book, its first four chapters, deals primarily with the theme of loss, as Erik's often idyllic childhood is disrupted both by the gradual loss of his sight and by the sudden loss of his beloved mother. Although these are very different experiences, they both involve many of the same emotions -- anger, grief, and denial -- and they bring about some of the same reactions -- incomprehension, excessive and sometimes dangerous risk-taking, and lasting emotional confusion. This section contains many of the most emotionally touching scenes in the book.

The second phase, developed primarily in chapters five through eight, details Erik's maturation process as he begins to accept his situation and learns to live with his blindness. Beginning with his experience in summer camp, he realizes the importance of organizational systems in his life, learns Braille, and acquires his first guide dog, Wizard. Erik begins to take seriously the adaptations he must make to lead a satisfying and independent life. In this stage he graduates from high school and attends college, continuing his athletic career as a wrestler. This phase involves the greatest acquisition of self-knowledge, Erik's realization that his blindness is not something to fight against but rather a part of himself he must learn to live with and even use to his advantage. Middle and high school students struggling to form their own identities may find some of these scenes reminiscent of their own experiences.

The longest section of the book, and the one that perhaps contains the most food for discussion, is the section from chapter nine to the end. Here Erik combats the limiting

assumptions and expectations of others and finds ways to excel and achieve important personal goals. He finds work in teaching, an occupation many thought he could not pursue, becomes an accomplished rock climber and mountaineer, marries, and becomes a father. Throughout this section Erik consistently displays his strength, resourcefulness, and will power. To succeed, he must either surpass or ignore the debilitating effects not of blindness, but of culturally imposed assumptions of what blind people can accomplish. He becomes a member of several climbing teams and discovers the strength that comes from a group of people linking their strength and will power to achieve the seemingly impossible. This culminates in his successful ascent of Mt. Everest in 2001 when he became the only blind man to stand on top of the world.

Through an even wider lens, Erik's story can provide a refreshing alternative to celebrity-driven notions of the contemporary hero. Rather than identifying heroes simply on the basis of fame, wealth, or glamour, students can seek a deeper understanding of heroic behavior. Heroes are those with the strength to reach deep into their hearts, confront their limitations head-on, and discover the true powers of the human race -- the power that exists in each of our two small hands, the power that transforms our lives into something miraculous, the power that, when joined with others, transforms the very face of the earth.

II. Reading and Discussion Guide

Each chapter of the book contains life lessons that teachers can discuss with their students. The episodes in Erik's life can provoke a dialogue on what students want to do with their lives, what they want their legacies to be, how they hope to impact the world. Teachers will find the book invaluable in helping their students in the process of shaping their lives. What follows is a list of discussion topics, organized by chapter, based on these larger, recurring themes:

- Reaching beyond convention
- Leadership
- Achieving potential
- Turning initial failure into ultimate success
- Teamwork—the invincibility of a team whose members remain connected and pull in the same direction
- Living life as a pioneer
- The nature of vision—not eyesight but a unified sense of one's life direction which binds all one's goals and objectives into a guiding purpose
- Dealing with sweeping change and developing the resiliency needed to look for new opportunities when old ones disappear

Introduction

Look at examples of the major themes that will recur throughout Erik's life:

1. "All my life, fear had paralyzed me"; "The greatest fear is in the reaching"; "A delicate strand of hope balanced by fear, each keeping the other in its place" (p. 3). What do you fear? When is reaching frightening? In what ways do human beings use hope to balance their fears?
2. "The things I could not do, I would let go; but the things I could do, I would learn to do well" (p. 5). As you read, look for applications of this principle throughout Erik's life as well as your own.
3. "I would carry my share. I would contribute as any team member. I would not be carried up the mountain and spiked on top like a football. If I were to reach the summit, I would reach it with dignity" (p. 5). When has carrying your share given you a feeling of dignity?

Chapter 1: Quasimodo

Examine the ways Erik's parents helped him establish a lifelong attitude toward blindness:

1. "He's going to go to a normal school, with normal children, and even if I have to go to school with him, he's going to learn" (p. 14). "He's blind. He's not stupid, and he can do better work than this"(p. 17). "He doesn't need self-esteem . . . He needs to know how to spell" (p. 17). How does Ellen Baker Weihenmayer's "fierce will" influence her son's development?

2. “My father was like a broom, sweeping me out into the world, while my mother was the dustpan, constantly gathering up the shattered pieces and putting me back together again” (p.21). How do Erik’s parents play complementary roles in his early life? Create a metaphor to describe the effect an adult has had on your life. Share your metaphor with the class. Also look at the ways Erik’s later personality and beliefs begin to emerge from the experiences of his youth.
3. “I knew I had entered a place that was beautiful and sacred, a place that only the rare explorer, with patience and persistence, would ever see. Years later, I would find that this feeling was the same as I would experience on the tops of mountains” (p.28). Where have you experienced a feeling of mystery and beauty in your life? Why is such a feeling important to all of us?
4. “Finally, he saw me give up in disgust and angrily push my bike into the garage. Saying nothing to my dad as I stormed inside, I slammed the door” (p. 30). What situations cause your frustration to come out as anger?

Chapter 2: A World In-Between

The world in between is both Erik’s increasing blindness and the realities of middle school social life. In this chapter, look for ways to intertwine these two experiences and to connect them to students’ lives.

1. Erik says, “Being included was more important than the fear of getting hurt” (p. 35). How is this statement true for all middle school students, not only blind ones?

2. How many examples of daredevil behavior can you find in this chapter? Why did Erik want “to elevate myself to the rank of serious offender” (p.35)?
3. Erik vandalizes a construction site and experiences a nightmare that night. What other examples can you find, from your own experiences, news, television, or movies, of people whose fear takes the form of anger?

Chapter 3: Helplessness

1. How many examples of Erik’s helplessness can be found in this chapter?
2. What different emotions does Erik experience as his blindness becomes total?
3. What examples does he include of his frustration emerging in the form of poor judgment or angry behavior? Share a situation from your own life where you reacted in a similar way.
4. Erik gives an example from D. H. Lawrence of a literary passage to which he related personally. Share with the class a passage from literature that reflects something you have thought or felt.

Chapter 4: Faint Recognition

1. Jerry the bus driver, Mrs. Mundy, Erik’s friend Chris, and the captain of the wrestling team all play important roles in helping Erik abandon his false pride and begin to accept the realities of his life. Erik says of his first wrestling experience, “the captain had done the greatest thing he could possibly do: he had shown me no mercy” (p. 67). Why is this true for Erik? Has it ever been true for you?

2. The death of his mother, following so quickly after the complete loss of his sight, causes Erik to believe “if there was a God, he must enjoy putting humans through a great cruel punishment, like he had done to Job in the *Bible*” (p. 74). Who is Job? What role does suffering play in human life? Is life essentially just or unjust? Explore your own beliefs through Erik’s experiences here.
3. Erik decides to look for his mother’s spirit inside himself saying, “wherever you are, I won’t stop looking until I find you” (p. 78). Do you believe we carry parts of others’ spirits inside ourselves? What sources of strength do you carry inside yourself as gifts from people who have loved you or touched your life in important ways?

Chapter 5: Blind Warriors

1. What is a turning point in life? In what way is summer camp a turning point for Erik? What have been turning points in your life?
2. Erik’s camp counselor Carl teaches him the importance of systems. Why are systems so important to any blind person? What systems do sighted people rely on?
3. Erik embarrasses himself showing off in front of Alex at the baseball game. Discuss why he does so. Has anything similar ever happened to you? When? Is embarrassment always a bad thing or can we learn from it? How?
4. Nick, the rock-climbing instructor, tells Erik, “this sport is all about self-reliance, about moving upward under your own power. To be independent, you’re going to have to find your way up the rock” (p .95). Does Erik succeed? How? In what way might rock climbing be a metaphor for Erik’s life at this stage?

Chapter 6: Wizard, the Chick Magnet

1. How does working with Wizard give Erik greater independence? How does Wizard also complicate his life?
2. This chapter contains many scenes of Erik and Wizard together. Bring a photo of a pet to class and share a few stories.
3. The trip to New York City is a comical adventure shared by a group of friends. Write a journal entry of an amusing episode you shared with your friends and read it to the class.

Chapter 7: Flailing to Independence

1. Look at the scene in the comedy club. Erik suffers the embarrassment of becoming part of the comedians' routines. Unlike the Fenway Park scene earlier, he does not bring unwanted attention to himself by showing off. How does he seem to have handled the embarrassment? How do you handle embarrassing situations?
2. The trek to Machu Picchu gives Erik early practice in the art of teamwork, especially in the outdoors. How does his ability to function as part of a team improve in this chapter?
3. Erik's arrival in the Yali village of Anganook is the first time he realizes his life can serve as a way to teach others. Discuss how overcoming stereotypes can provide positive examples for others to follow.

Chapter 8: Perceptions

1. Erik begins a search for his first job. What difficulties does he encounter? In what ways do potential employers impose their stereotypes on him? Have others' assumptions about you ever been a barrier in your progress toward a goal?
2. How do others' perceptions of Erik's blindness limit him? How do our false perceptions of other people limit our ability to truly see them? What kinds of false perceptions can affect all people, not merely the blind? When have you overcome a negative or limiting stereotype?
3. Erik says of his decision to move to Phoenix, "some of these choices . . . turn out to be catalysts that shape your life in ways you may not have expected" (p. 134). What examples of this principle can you find? Has it been true in your lifetime?

Chapter 9: Thirty Sets of Eyes

1. How does Erik's teaching career begin with doubt and failure? In what ways are his early failures a result of his false preconceptions about teaching?
2. How does Erik's student Guru teach his teacher an important lesson? How does Erik's ability to learn this lesson help him reorganize his classroom environment more successfully?

Chapter 10: Blind Faith

1. Erik recounts a metaphor from one of his professors comparing teachers to two kinds of coffeemakers. Create metaphors to describe the differences between your teachers' styles of instruction.

2. The story of the imaginary fiancé becomes a momentary obstacle to Erik's developing relationship with Ellen Reeve. How does the exaggeration begin? How does it trap Erik in an uncomfortable position? Can you supply any examples from your own experience of exaggerations that have backfired?
3. Erik is aware that dating him is at first difficult for Ellen. Why is this so? Have you ever had a friendship that was made complicated or awkward by the differences between you? How did you deal with those difficulties?

Chapter 11: Preparation

1. Erik describes his training regimen for the Mt. McKinley climb in considerable detail to illustrate the point that success doesn't simply occur but takes planning and long, difficult preparation. What are the key elements in his training? How does each contribute to making him better prepared for the mountain?
2. Why does Erik feel so uncomfortable on the television panel discussion of "inspirational" blind people? In his view, what is wrong with the premise of that show?

Chapter 12: Zero Zero

1. Mt. McKinley, Erik's first major world summit, is also his first exposure to the very real dangers and cold realities of mountaineering. How many examples of danger and difficulty can you find in this chapter? Which would be most frightening to you? How do danger and discomfort make Erik feel about the thrill of climbing?

2. Find as many examples as you can of the peculiar sense of humor common to mountain climbers. Why do you think this dark type of humor is found so frequently in such harsh conditions?
3. Discuss the idea of limits and thresholds. Erik often states his desire to extend his limits but also shows examples of climbers who went too far beyond theirs with disastrous results. How do these examples illustrate the difference between courageous risk-taking and foolhardy lack of caution? Where do you draw the line between these two in your own lives?

Chapter 13: “Big” Changes

1. What major life decisions does Erik make after the Mt. McKinley climb? How are these decisions related to each other?
2. Erik includes several reflective and philosophical passages in this chapter. Identify these passages and discuss how his newly formed life goals are a reflection of his personal philosophy. What two principles does he identify that will guide him in all areas of his life? What are your most important principles?

Chapter 14: Uhuru

1. Discuss Erik’s view of freedom: “Perhaps it was the freedom to make of my life what I wanted it to be, or at least the freedom to try, or to fail in the trying. Perhaps freedom itself was unobtainable and the goal was only to reach for it, strive for it, knowing all along that I would fall well short. Perhaps the importance was in the reaching out, and in the impossibility of it all . . .” (p. 219). What truth do you find

here? Does it apply to situations other than climbing mountains? Does it apply to the lives of students?

2. During the wedding ceremony on Kilimanjaro, Erik introduces the metaphor of life as a wheel, achieving balance only when its different facets work in harmony. In what ways is life like the spokes of a wheel? Can we become too narrowly focused on specific goals and lose sight of other important parts of our lives? What examples of this problem can you think of?

Chapter 15: Moving Through Darkness

1. Discuss the relationship between doubt and hope, based on the following passage: “Maybe I was simply guilty of dreaming beyond my ability. Sometimes my doubt completely filled me up, but amidst these feelings emerged a more powerful surge of hope” (p. 223). What kinds of doubts are most powerful? Can hope overcome doubt? How?
2. What is leadership? Erik says, “perhaps leadership was not so much a matter of raw talent, as raw courage” (p. 233). What does he mean by this statement? Do you think he is correct? Whom do you see as true leaders? Are leaders born or can leadership be learned and developed?

Chapter 16: The Nose

1. Discuss Erik’s beliefs about teamwork: “A mountain was such a huge and awesome force compared to the minuscule life of a human, to have a chance of standing on top, we combined our strengths and talents to become a more powerful force than we ever

could have been as individuals” (p. 246). In what other areas of life is this true? Have you experienced the power of a team working whole-heartedly toward a common goal?

Chapter 17: The Slag Heap

1. This chapter contains several more examples of humor in the face of difficult situations. Although some are distasteful, such as drinking from the wrong bottle, they illustrate the point that strong, healthy people can appreciate the humor in life even when the joke is on them. Discuss this idea. What other examples can you find in Erik’s book? In life? In your experiences?
2. How does Chris’s attitude of “positive pessimism” help the climbers deal with a harsh environment? Create your own examples of positive pessimism about school life, family, social relationships, and other areas of your experience. Make a list and read it to the class.
3. Erik realizes that the jokes made by the members of his team are not complaints but actually a form of love. What does he mean? Do people complain about things they secretly love? Do you?
4. Jeff tells Erik, “When you try big things . . . you gotta expect to fail sometimes” (p. 272). Is Jeff right? How do you know? Can failure, ironically, be a crucial ingredient of success? What examples of this important life principle can you find?

Chapter 18: I Did Not Die

1. Reread the card Erik sent himself after his mother's death. Compare it to the poem his grandmother gives him after his visit to the cemetery. Explain in your own words whether he has succeeded in finding his mother's spirit, and if so, how.
2. Talking to his grandmother, Erik finds "the courage to share my frustrations" (p. 278). Is admitting the things that bother us in our hearts a form of courage? What other examples can you think of?

Chapter 19: The Song of the Sirens

1. Discuss Erik's belief that "life is never meant to be easy; exciting, challenging maybe, rewarding from time to time, but never easy" (p. 282). Is this true for the sighted as well as the blind? How?
2. Discuss the relationship between despair and triumph found in the ascent of Aconcagua. Identify the different emotions Erik experiences during the slow, difficult climb. How do these negative emotions contribute to his final understanding of the symbolism of the summit? "A summit isn't just a place on a mountain. A summit exists in our hearts and minds. It is a tiny scrap of a dream made real, indisputable proof that our lives have meaning. A summit is a symbol that with our force of will and the power of our legs, our backs, and our two hands, we can transform our lives into whatever we choose them to be, whatever our hands are strong enough to create" (p. 297). What summits exist in your heart and mind?

Epilogue

1. What does Erik wish for his daughter Emma? How is this wish a product of his own life? On the whole, does he regret losing his sight? Why or why not?
2. How does ice climbing force Erik once again to “look beyond convention”? In what other ways has he done this throughout his life?
3. When Erik takes off his gloves and touches the ice, he gasps, “for the sheer beauty felt through my fingertips” (p. 302). In what other surprising places can we find unusual examples of beauty?

Everest

1. This chapter contains many examples of Erik’s doubts and fears about his participation in the Everest expedition. How many can you find? Which come from within and which come from the negative comments and low expectations of others? What does he mean when he says, “people’s expectations had a way of turning into boundaries” (p. 312)? How does he combat negative thinking and find the strength to continue?
2. Find the passages that explore the nature and importance of teamwork in achieving a seemingly impossible goal. In how many ways do the members of Erik’s team contribute to each other’s success? What situations in your own life have allowed you to experience the power of two or more people increasing their strength by working together toward a common purpose?
3. In what ways is the Everest climb different from Erik’s other adventures? How do he and his teammates combat these difficulties?

4. Ironically, during the final ascent to the summit, the climb becomes somewhat easier for Erik than for his teammates. What four factors does he identify to explain this irony? How do they make him feel like an equal member of the team?
5. Erik describes the knife-edge as a snow-covered ridge the length of a football field and the width of a picnic table, with sheer drops of thousands of feet on either side. What are the most physically difficult and psychologically intimidating things you've ever had to do?
6. Erik ends by admitting that part of his pleasure comes from "taking [other people's] very narrow parameters of what's possible and what's not, and shattering them into a million pieces" (p. 342). What are parameters? When is it good to shatter them? Has reading Erik's life story changed your understanding of the "parameters of what's possible"?

III. Suggestions for Projects

Erik's story lends itself to many different kinds of projects, as well as subject matter. The experienced teacher will, find many ways to adapt the book's content and ideas to the individual classroom; therefore, the following are intended merely as suggestions to indicate some possible approaches, whether in essay form, short research projects, or experiential personal narratives or activities.

Writing

1. Essay topics can be easily devised from any of the eight themes listed at the beginning of Section II (Reading and Discussion Guide). In each case, students could be asked to write essays in which they summarize Erik's ideas on a particular topic, using direct references to the text, and then comparing Erik's views to the student's own.
2. Throughout the reading of the book, students might keep a response journal, noting passages that made a particularly strong impression on them and recording their reactions to these passages. These journals can profitably be used on a daily basis to stimulate discussion, since many of the scenes and passages referred to in Section II will come up in student journals. These journals, with a final entry reflecting on the book as a whole and its application to students' own experiences, could serve as a final project as well.
3. A snapshot is a description of a moment in time, usually revolving around a significant event in a person's life. It is a writer's tool used to slow down time and describe in detail a special moment. In Chapter 18, page 274-275, Erik visits his

mother's gravesite and describes his surroundings using his different senses. Have students choose a moment of significance in their own lives. Freeze that moment and describe it using all five senses. A thought-shot is an extension of the snapshot, but now the writer expresses his thoughts, feelings, associations, and memories regarding that moment. Next, have students add a thought-shot to their snapshot.

4. If *Touch the Top of the World* is read in conjunction with a larger unit studying the nature of heroes, ask students to write an essay comparing Erik's story to that of another heroic figure they have studied. How are the two similar? How are they different?
5. Creative writing projects can be easily incorporated. Students could imagine walking the knife-edge on Everest, spending a night in a small tent during a blizzard, going through the first day at a new school as a blind person, or write a poem of encouragement to a friend facing a difficult ordeal, as Erik's friend Kevin did during the Everest climb.

Research

The book lends itself to a number of short research projects culminating in oral or written reports to the class. Using library and Internet resources, ask students to prepare brief presentations, working either individually or in teams, on any of the following topics:

- Contact the AFB (American Foundation for the Blind) for information about the realities of life for blind people, employment discrimination, and also for information about other blind people who are making notable contributions to American society.

- Research the life of Helen Keller.
- Write a report and/ or demonstrate equipment used in mountaineering, rock, or ice climbing.
- Contact the NFB (National Federation of the Blind) for information about its mission as an advocacy organization by the blind.
- Look at the media attention Erik and his teammates received after the Everest expedition (including a cover story in *Time* magazine).
- Make a poster and write a report on the Braille alphabet, Braille readers, and other technology designed for the blind. Better yet, learn the Braille alphabet and use a stylus to write a short message.
- Research the training and preparation of guide dogs. List the top ten commands you would like your guide dog to know if you were blind.
- Learn about RFB&D (Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic), a major source of books for blind and dyslexic readers. Volunteer. Find out how you can sign up to read for blind students.

Literature/Film

Use Erik's films to bring the message of the book to life in the classroom:

1. By watching the *Touch the Top of the World* feature film, students can examine the difference between how an author, a screenwriter and a director interpret an experience.
 - Read the passage when Erik is preparing to jump over a river of snowmelt on Aconcagua (pp.288-290), and compare that to the corresponding scene found

in the *Touch the Top of the World* feature film (21:09-23:16). Then compare Erik's wrestling match (pp. 66-68) - (17:00-19:21). Have students discuss the ways these experiences are interpreted. How are they similar? How are they different? Did the director stay true to the essence of the experience?

- Examine the multi-stage process of an experience translated into the pages of a book, into a screenplay, and finally into a film, by having students break into pairs and each write a short narrative of an experience from their lives. Then have the pair switch papers with each writing dialogue and screen directions for his or her partner's narrative. As an extension, students can act out their scenes.
 - Students can write a movie review or an essay comparing the book and the film.
2. Use the documentary *Farther Than the Eye Can See* to examine the story telling device of the Hero's Journey, which follows a character from his or her daily life, through a trying adventure, and safely home.
- Have students read the final chapter of *Touch the Top of the World* entitled "Everest." Then have students watch the documentary, *Farther than the Eye Can See*, and discuss how Erik's adventure relates to the hero's journey.
 - Students may be able to create their own documentary film in the style of *Farther than the Eye Can See*. Borrow a video camera from the library or media center and have students act out Erik's historic Everest ascent, or have them create an adventure of their own. (Students may take on the roll of actor, videographer, screenwriter, director, etc)

3. In 2004, Erik and his team led a group of six blind students from Tibet to an elevation of 21,500 feet on the flanks of Mt. Everest. This is higher than any team of blind climbers has ever stood.
 - Have students watch the film, *Blindsight*, and then visit the website from the expedition, www.climbingblind.org. Have students write an essay or discuss how blindness is perceived in Tibetan culture. What are the reasons for these perceptions? What is being done to change them?
 - Visit the Climbing Blind website for more creative and fun activities.
http://www.climbingblind.org/The%20Cause/educational_landing.icm

Geography

1. Learn about the Seven Summits referenced in chapter 13 of *Touch the Top of the World*.
 - Research their locations and elevations. This information can be used to fill in a blank map or be made into an attractive poster.
 - Students can use Erik's website www.touchthetop.com and the interactive map feature within the "For students and Teachers" section to help them learn more about the Seven Summits.
 - Make a map showing the different areas of Mt. Everest mentioned during the climb of Erik's team.

- Some geographers refer to an eighth continent called Austral-Asia or Oceania. Have students visit the “8th Summit” section of Erik’s website photo galleries or click on Carstensz Pyramid on the website map for more information.
 - Divide into groups according to these mountain ranges where the Seven Summits lie. Have groups present their findings about the latitude, longitude, and general climate of the region. How does the latitude and longitude affect the climate of each peak?
2. Using the library and Internet, have students study the physiological effects of extreme high altitude, what climbers refer to as the Death Zone, above 8,000 meters.
 3. Create a “treasure hunt” using the photo galleries on www.touchthetop.com. Use questions to guide students to different photos.

Examples:

- What are the two names used for the highest peak in North America?
- What mountain was Erik’s seventh summit? Where is it located?
- What animal do climbers use throughout the Himalayas to move their gear from camp to camp?

Simulations

Demonstrations and experiences with the nature of physical disabilities can help sensitize students to the enormous adjustments many must make. A brief sampler of ideas might include the following:

- Tape-record the voices of each member of the class. See who can recognize the most voices when they are played back.

- Work in pairs. Blindfold one partner and tie the other's hands behind his or her back. Together, make and eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. What limitations did the team have? What strengths? Whose task was more difficult? Why?
- Have teams of two students pitch a tent, one blindfolded and one wearing ski gloves. Which is more of a disability in this case, lack of sight or lack of touch?
- Pair students, one blindfolded, resting a hand on the shoulder of the other, who serves as the guide. Ask students to pay particular attention to the sensations they experience as their guide leads them around the room, down the hall, up a flight of stairs, through the tables of the cafeteria, etc. After ten minutes, have partners change roles and navigate their way back to the classroom. (Instruction should be given that under no circumstances may a guide lead a blindfolded person into any danger or abandon a partner.)
- Have students go outside, either in a quiet place, a noisy place, or both, closing their eyes for five minutes, then writing about what they experienced relying on their other senses.
- Have students go for a walk in a park or other natural setting and writing all their sensory impressions, omitting all visual observations.

IV. Additional research resources

The following websites have more information about Erik and the various projects in which he is involved.

www.2001everest.com

Learn more about Erik's historic Mt. Everest expedition when he became the only blind person to reach the top of the world. The expedition also set three other records: the oldest man to summit, the first father/son duo, and the most people from one team to reach the summit in a single day.

www.climbingblind.org

Follow the expedition in which Erik and his Everest teammates helped guide six blind Tibetan teenagers to 21,000 feet on the north side of Mount Everest. The team stood higher than any other team of blind people in history.

www.blindsightthemovie.com

Learn more about the documentary, *BlindSight*, which followed Erik's Tibet expedition. *BlindSight* has won top honors at several film festivals including L.A., Palm Springs, and Berlin.

www.nobarriersusa.org

Learn more about No Barriers, a non-profit organization begun by Erik, Mark Wellman - the first paraplegic to climb the 3000-foot rock face of El Capitan, and Hugh Herr - a scientist at Harvard's prestigious Prosthetics Laboratory and a double-leg-amputee. The goal of No Barriers is to promote innovative ideas, approaches, and assistive technologies that help people with disabilities push through their own personal barriers to live full and active lives.

www.globalexplorers.org

Learn more about Erik's Leading the Way Expeditions in which he leads integrated teams of blind and sighted high school students through the Peruvian Andes. The project is conducted in partnership with Global Explorers, a non-profit organization that offers educational leadership experiences for students.

<http://www.eighthsummit.com/>

Learn more about Erik's most recent expedition to climb the eighth summit, Carstensz Pyramid. Erik summited in late August 2008 with partners, Charley Mace and Hans Florine. The mountain has been closed to climbers due to political strife in the region and has only recently become open after 25 years.

www.adversityadvantage.com

In Erik's book, the Adversity Advantage, co-authored by Dr. Paul Stoltz, you will learn to convert your everyday obstacles and frustrations into the fuel that powers your life to growth and innovation, and helps you accomplish your dreams. Imagine if adversity was no longer an impediment, but instead, the pathway.

www.touchthetop.com

Learn more about Erik's adventures like climbing the "Seven Summits," and view an exciting photo gallery. You can also learn more about his two books and award winning Everest documentary, *Farther Than the Eye Can See*.

About the Curriculum Guide Author

Lance Coon has taught English, both middle school and high school, for thirty years. For the last six years he has been a reader for Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic. He has known Erik and Ellie Weihenmayer for ten years and has hiked with them into the Grand Canyon. Lance and his wife Judy Mitchell live in Phoenix, Arizona, where they teach at

Phoenix Country Day School. They hope students and teachers everywhere may have the opportunity to **Touch the Top of the World!**

Touch the Top of the World Educational Package

Thank you for purchasing the Touch the Top of the world Educational Package. Enclosed you will find Erik's memoir, Touch the Top of the World, along with an array of accompanying materials and videos to bring Erik's inspiring message to life in the classroom.

1. Touch the Top of the World.

From the snow-capped summit of McKinley to the towering peaks of Aconcagua and Kilimanjaro to the ultimate challenge, Mount Everest, this is a story about daring to dream in the face of impossible odds. According to Publisher's Weekly, Erik's memoir is, "Moving and adventure packed, Weihenmayer tells his extraordinary story with humor, honesty, and vivid detail, and his fortitude and enthusiasm are deeply inspiring."

2. Newly Updated Touch the Top of the World Curriculum Guide.

This guide provides comprehensive activities and discussions to flesh out themes from the book about the importance of leadership, teamwork, diversity, and creating a life's vision.

3. Touch the Top of the World Feature Film.

This A&E dramatization of Erik's memoir is only available as part of this educational package. This breathtaking story follows Erik's journey from the time he was a three-year-old boy diagnosed with a rare eye disease through his childhood when his parents challenged him to live a normal life despite his blindness. It's a story of dreams, determination and heroism, and one man's passion to do the impossible while inspiring his community and an entire generation.

4. Farther Than the Eye Can See.

This special 45-minute educational edition documentary has won 20 International Film Festival awards, was nominated for two Emmy's, and was ranked by Men's Journal as one of the top twenty adventure DVDs of all time. It is an intimate look into Erik's team that still holds five world records on Mt. Everest.

5. Blindsight.

Blindsight follows the gripping adventure of Erik and six Tibetan teenagers on their journey to climb a mountain in the shadow of Everest. A dangerous journey soon becomes a seemingly impossible challenge made all the more remarkable by the fact that the teenagers are blind. Blindsight received the Peoples Choice Award at the L.A., London, and Berlin Film Festivals.

6. Climb High CD.

A unique compilation of music inspired by the life and adventure of Erik Weihenmayer

7. Phone call-in by Erik. This is available only for orders of over 100 books.

As a former teacher Erik always enjoys Q&A sessions with students who have read Touch the Top of the World. This is usually done as a reward at the end of the study. Students are encouraged to question Erik on any aspect or theme in the book.

8. Signed photo of Erik crossing the South Summit on Mt. Everest.

A great memento for the classroom wall

Touch the Top of the World A Blind Man's Journey To Climb Farther Than The Eye Can See

By Erik Weihenmayer

From the snow-capped summit of McKinley to the towering peaks of Aconcagua and Kilimanjaro to the ultimate challenge, Mount Everest, this is a story about daring to dream in the face of impossible odds. It is about finding the courage to reach for that ultimate summit, and transforming your life into something truly miraculous.

Touch the Top of the World, published in ten countries and six languages, was one of fifty books selected for the 2002 National Book Festival in Washington D.C. hosted by the First Lady and the Library of Congress. Erik is also the Author of the *Adversity Advantage: Turning Everyday Struggles Into Everyday Greatness*, released in January, 2007. He has published articles in *Time*, *Forbs*, *Reader's Digest*, *Outside*, and *Climbing* magazine.

Touch the Top of the World is often used in secondary schools and colleges, including Boston College's American Adventure Literature and Colorado University's Business in Profile courses. Erik and his book are heading the autobiography section of Prentice Hall's 2006 literature anthology. In conjunction with an excerpt from **Touch the Top of the World**, Erik provides guidance on his personal writing style and discipline.

In April 2004, Erik was part of a Philadelphia schools program, which is unique in the nation. Students from 49 institutions of learning – public, independent, charter, parochial, and schools for the blind read **Touch the Top of the World**; teachers built its content into their courses using a Curriculum Guide; an Everest teammate of Erik's, also a professional speaker, and a star of the book, visited many schools; then Erik presented his powerful message at the Academy of Music to 2500 students, teachers, and parents, followed by a luncheon of 300+ Philadelphia business and education leaders. A strength of the program was the series of reinforcing messages which impacted students, families, and their community. This program was recently repeated in Boston.

After Erik's Mt. Everest ascent, Braille Without Borders, a school for the blind in Tibet, invited him to teach its students mountaineering and rock climbing. His many climbs gave the teenagers the courage to excel in a culture which affords few opportunities for the blind. Erik and six Everest team members went to Tibet in May 2004 to train the students, and then in October led them on a climb to the Rombuk Glacier on the north side of Mt. Everest. Once seen as pariahs, the teenagers ultimately stood together at 21,500-feet., higher than any team of blind people in history. Steven Haft, producer of such blockbusters as *Dead Poets' Society*, made a documentary on the ascent which opened to standing ovations at the Toronto, L.A., and London Film Festivals. The film will be released theatrically in spring of 2007.

Erik is a national spokesperson of Verizon's Literacy Program, which reaches young people and families around the country in need of improved literacy skills. Erik is also a promotional focus of the *Get Caught Reading* campaign sponsored by the Association of American Publishers.

Erik's image on top of a summit can be seen on thousands of highway and airport billboards across the nation. The campaign is sponsored by the Foundation for a Better Life with a mission of promoting good values. Lincoln, Gandhi, Churchill, and Christopher Reeve are also featured. Ironically, Erik's promoted value is "vision."

Erik is one of the top speakers on the corporate circuit. A partial list of his clients include Google, Wells Fargo, Cingular, Cisco Systems, J. P. Morgan/Chase, GE, Bank of America, Merrill Lynch, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, and P&G. He has shared platforms with Steven Covey, Tom Peters, Rudy Giuliani, General Norman Schwarzkopf, and President George Bush. Erik was the commencement speaker at Boston College (audience of 20,000) where he received an Honorary Doctorate.

From Publisher's Weekly:

In this moving and adventure-packed memoir, Weihenmayer begins with his gradual loss of sight as a very young child. By the time he became fully blind in high school, he had already developed the traits that would carry him to the summits of some of the world's highest mountains as well as onto the frequently hazardous slopes of daily life: charm, resilience, a sense of humor, a love of danger and a concern for others. His eloquent memoir exhibits all these traits. Weihenmayer - a thrill seeker who skydives, climbs mountains and skis - devotes the first half of the book to his adolescence, punctuated by his loss of sight, his mother's sudden death and his diligent efforts not only to pick up girls, but first to figure out which ones were attractive. With its many tales of pranks, adventures and the talents of his guide dog, this half alone is worth the price of admission.

He goes on to chronicle his young adulthood, including his teaching career and his passion for climbing, seeded during a month-long skills camp for blind adolescents and blossoming on his harrowing ascent of Mount McKinley. He describes fearsome ascents of Kilimanjaro - with his fiancée, so they can be married near the crater summit - El Capitan and Aconcagua's Polish Glacier. Weihenmayer tells his extraordinary story with humor, honesty and vivid detail, and his fortitude and enthusiasm are deeply inspiring. With the insightful intimacy of Tom Sullivan's classic *If You Could See What I Hear* and the intensity of the best adventure narratives, Weihenmayer's story will appeal to a broad audience.

Book Testimonials:

"Wow Erik, what a fantastic book. I can picture, in great detail, every part of your journey. Mostly, I found myself laughing hysterically (usually out in public....I am sure people thought I was crazy). Parts of your story touched me too, and I would find myself welling up with tears or becoming frustrated right along with you. I love your message! Keep inspiring others to go for their dreams!"
Tammy MacDonald-Doran

*"I just finished reading the most wonderful book I have ever read. It's personal, it's a journey, it's an inspiration. I was absorbed with this book from beginning to end. The book is *Touch the Top of the World* by Erik Weihenmayer. I think it's the book of the year, a must-read, an inspiring journey. Regardless of who you are as a person, you'll want to read this."* L. W.

"I am reading your book this week. It is better than any top-selling novel! I can't put it down. I am amazed at how well you weave humor, frustration, and determination all into the same story of your life. Thanks again for sharing it."

Julie

"Thank you so much for writing your amazing book, it was un-put-downable. It resonated within me. I have lived a life in the darkness of fear (all totally needless and groundless) but God in his

wisdom gave me your book when I needed it. Even though writing this note fills me with fear it is important for me to let you know it came into my life at an important time and has changed me. Please let me encourage you and your family to continue the good work you are doing."
Lisa Cornish (Nuriootpa, South Australia)