

Climbing for the Greater Good

From African alpine jungles to frozen waterfalls in New England, climber Majka Burhardt is comfortable on any vertical terrain. Now she's using her skills to protect an ecosystem and the people who depend on it.

BY IAN FERGUSON
PHOTOS BY GABE ROGEL

Majka Burhardt was in her element leading an expedition on Mount Namuli in Mozambique. A professional guide, she has brought people up mountains all around the world, but this time her clients were scientists documenting one of the most diverse unexplored ecosystems in the world. Together, they discovered dozens of species, some never before seen, on the first ascents of Namuli.

For many, the story might end there. The expedition was a major success; on to the next unclimbed mountain. But the expedition was just the beginning for Burhardt. Now she is using leadership skills developed on steep walls to run a global nonprofit that combines environmental stewardship with social empowerment. Called Legado, the organization aims to preserve the rare mountain ecosystem of Namuli while working with the human communities nearby.

Going the extra mile is a theme for Burhardt, who is a top-level ice, mixed and rock climbing athlete. The Jackson, NH resident found time between running her company, training, climbing, writing a book and raising infant twins – a boy and a girl, five months old – to answer some questions for Wild Northeast.



TOP Burhardt on Repentance, W15, Cathedral Ledge, New Hampshire.

BOTTOM Wrangling icicles on Great Madness, W15, Mount Willard, New Hampshire.



Where were you born?

I was born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

You were the fourth woman in the United States to become certified by the AMGA. In terms of your climbing achievements on ice or rock, how does that rank?

Pursuing professional AMGA status as a guide was exceptionally important to me from the start of my guiding career back in 1998. I started out guiding big mountains and expeditions around the world and then turned my focus to rock guiding in the early 2000's and thus focused my certification in that discipline. Back then it was amazing to me that only three other women had earned any AMGA certifications before me. Since then there have been 73 women certified across the disciplines by the AMGA. It's been an amazing time of growth.

When did you start going to Africa?

I first went to Africa in 2006 when I was a journalist chronicling a story of the search for the origin of a rare coffee that garnered \$150/lb. Once I saw photos of sandstone towers in the north of the country, I knew I'd stay in Ethiopia for the climbing.

What makes Mount Namuli so special, and how did you first get involved with this mountain?

Mount Namuli is a trove for scientific discoveries with new species to science everywhere on the rock face, in the rainforests, the grasslands, and more. It is a vital part of the ecological landscape of the Eastern Afromontane ecoregion. It's also seen as the ancestral homeland of over 2 Million Lomwe people in Mozambique and Malawi. I got involved with Namuli when I became obsessed with Mozambique back in 2010 and realized it provided an opportunity to test my theory that climbing, science, and grassroots community conservation could be combined to make an impact far larger than the three of them in isolation. .

What was it like to lead the first explorations of this unique ecosystem with a team of scientists who were discovering new species?

Our 2014 expedition on Mount Namuli was a true testament to teamwork and tenacity. Every single person involved invested themselves 200% to pull off what would have been impossible otherwise. It was an honor to lead that group, and every day on the mountain I was thankful that I followed my instincts to create the versatile team that we had. In climbing these days, the motto is light and fast. To make an impact on Namuli and to do the hard work, accomplish the climb, make the discoveries, and listen to the community we had to have a different philosophy. We had to go deep and be thorough.

Did you find anything completely unexpected up there?

Our scientific discoveries on Namuli included one new frog species, the southernmost record of a Caecilian in the world at the time of discovery, 40 ant genera, and 28 other amphibians and reptiles.

How does Legado, the non-profit you founded, help support the people and biodiversity of the Namuli region of Mozambique?

Legado works hand-in-hand with the local communities encircling Mount Namuli to create a more sustainable future both for their lives and their environment. Our goal is for those communities to lead



the way forward with our support, versus our leading the way for their future. To do this well, and to do it sustainably, takes time. We have great local partners in Mozambique and right now we're all working to create a community-managed protected area on the mountain in tandem with new agriculture programs that better preserve the health of the soils, increase yields, and nourish families. When your goal is to preserve one of the last rainforests in Mozambique and support the people who call it home you need to get creative and collaborative across all of your programs to make it happen.

For those of us who haven't seen the film *Namuli*, how can we see it?

Namuli is on a global film festival tour right now with recent showings in Nigeria, Slovakia, and Montana. It's also on tour with Mountainfilm and people can request it as part of that series, or inquire with us about hosting a showing. The film will also be available online in the late spring.

Switching tracks, where do you live in New Hampshire?

My husband Peter Doucette and I live in Jackson, NH with our five-month old twins Kaz and Irenna.

Compared to the Whites, there are many bigger, more impressive mountain ranges out west. As a top level mountain athlete, what made you decide to put down roots here?

The ice and mixed climbing in the Northeast were what drew me here initially—that and my then boyfriend, now husband. Add to that the rock climbing, the skiing, and the community and you have one of the best places in the US to live and train as an athlete.

What are some of your favorite ice climbs in the Northeast?

Omega (Cannon), Remission (Cathedral), Within Reason (Frankenstein), Mindbender (Willoughby) Cocaine (Frankenstein)... there are so many.

Any ice climbing goals for this coming winter?

I'm looking forward to climbing a full range of routes this winter and taking the time to explore some more of the classic moderates I have never done at the start of the season. I've never climbed Willies or Shoestring, for example— and getting back into shape post twin pregnancy is a great time to explore a new-to-you facet of your local climbing scene. I've come back from a dozen or so injuries over the years and have learned to enjoy the time when you get to rise back through the grades en route to climbing hard again.

With twins to raise, do you still guide?

I moved to guiding part-time a few years back to allow me to have time to pursue my personal climbing goals and run Legado. I love getting out with new and long-time clients and book days through Peter's and my company, Mountain Sense, mountainsenseguides.com

How old will your twins be when they get their first climbing shoes?

In utero. Seriously.

What's the next big project on your horizon?

I have a new book I'm working on to be published by Patagonia in 2018/19 about how and why I've pushed climbing up against environmentalism and social entrepreneurship— when it's worked, when it's failed, and why I keep trying to do it.

LEFT Majka Burhardt places a cam on Spice is Nice, 5.11, Teton Canyon, Idaho.

RIGHT Wrapping an alpine coil on the Palisades Traverse, Sierras, California.