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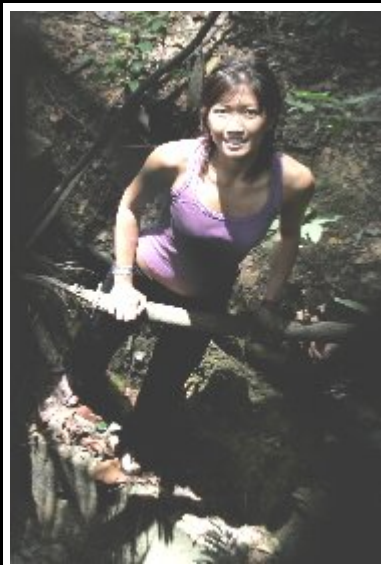
Campus Life

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Prime peak performers

No mountain's too daunting for Jane and her all-woman team, writes MINDY TAN

TWENTY-one-year-old Jane Lee is aiming for peaks that few dare reach for.



Everest-bound: NUS undergraduate scholar Jane Lee is leading Singapore's (and South-east Asia's) first all-woman team to scale the world's highest, most revered and feared summit in 2008. The team has already conquered two lower Himalayan peaks. Tibet's 8,201m Cho Oyu peak will test them in 2007 before they embark on their 8,850m trek up the Everest the following year

The leader of the Women's Everest Team, the first in Singapore and South-east Asia, Jane is a full-time student at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and is on the university's Scholars Programme.

A straight-A student, Jane acknowledges that while she trains six days a week, it is not as tough as it may sound.

'Training takes a maximum of three to four hours a day, and this is inclusive of travelling and wash-up time. You just have to sacrifice some things, like kopi time, or your movie time with friends. It's manageable; you just have to sacrifice a few things here and there,' she says.

So what is it about mountaineering that keeps her so faithful to this busy schedule?

One of three siblings, she had the love for the outdoors inculcated in her from a young age. Her father used to bring them out often, sharing with them his love for nature and outdoor sports. As Jane puts it: 'I was never the stay-at-home kind - the type that engaged in masak masak (Malay for playing house).'

But the turning point came during a trek in Nepal in 2000. Upon seeing the mountains, she realised that she wanted to climb to the top and not just reach the base camp and turn back.

It was only upon entering NUS that she found the way to turn her dreams into reality - the Make It Real (MIR) programme. Started in 2001 by members of the Singapore Mountaineering team, the programme was aimed at NUS students who were interested in mountaineering.

Says Jane: 'We were a special batch because for the first time, five of the six members were girls. After the climb, we saw that the public was actually interested, and decided to form the first women's team.'

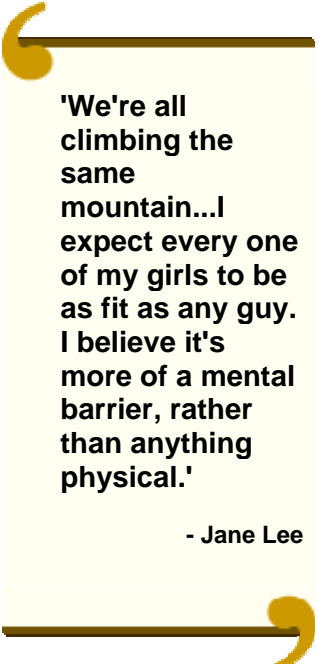
Since then, Jane has conquered three peaks. In 2003, she went with the MIR team for a technical mountaineering course in New Zealand, climbing Mount Von Bulow (2,600 m). Last year, the Women's Everest Team went to Nepal to climb their first Himalayan peak, Island Peak (6,189 m). And in May this year, they climbed Nepal's Mera Peak (6,476 m).

In December this year, they will be flying to China to climb and take an ice-climbing course. Next year will usher in a 'seven thousander' - they have not decided on which mountain to tackle, as the choice will depend on the results of the ice-climbing course. Come 2007, it will be Cho Oyu in Tibet (8,201 m), and finally in 2008, Mount Everest (8,850 m).

In between climbs, the team engages in local training six days a week. This comprises three days of stair-climbing done carrying backpacks of 18-22 kg, two days of 12-15 km runs, and gym work on the sixth day. On alternate Saturdays, they do a long trek from MacRitchie to Bukit Timah and back, carrying their packs.

While the team is currently 16-strong, Jane is aiming for a final headcount of between eight and 10 people. Of the 16 members, Jane and three other team mates are from the MIR team.

Sisterly spirit



'We're all climbing the same mountain...I expect every one of my girls to be as fit as any guy. I believe it's more of a mental barrier, rather than anything physical.'

- Jane Lee

Jane has this to say of her team: 'Women's teams are fun, very sisterly. Because we train together and see each other so much, we've seen the worst of each other. Especially since we lived in a tent, sometimes we feel like tearing our hair out. But then, there's no ego problem!'

After climbing Mount Everest, the Women's Everest Team intends to form a women's alpine club in Singapore. Says Jane: 'Currently, our vision is to facilitate overseas training courses for women who want to take up climbing. We basically hope to form an official body.'

To people who believe that mountaineering is a sport that should be left to men, Jane has this to say: 'I know men have always been mountaineering, but we can do it too. There's Ellen MacArthur, the fastest person to sail around the world. We have women breaking barriers and breaking new ground, so I don't see why gender should hinder anything.'

'We're all climbing the same mountain. Everest is not going to care whether you're male or female. We're training as hard as the guys, and I expect every one of my girls to be as fit as any guy. I believe it's more of a mental barrier, rather than anything physical, or even real.'