

Redefining Possible



Despite losing his legs at age 5, Spencer West recently climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro.

When Spencer West was 5 years old, he lost his legs to a rare genetic disease. "My family was told I would never sit up by myself, I would never be able to walk on my own, I would never have a normal life," he said.

Yet West went on to disprove those grim predictions. Not only can he sit upright—he turned cartwheels in cheerleading competitions when he was in high school. Not only can he walk on his own—in 2012 he climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro on his hands. And while it's true that West is not leading what many would consider a normal life, that's because "normal" lives don't generally include traveling the world on behalf of a global nonprofit, sharing the stage with the Dalai Lama, or being featured in major news media across the world.

West shared his story with a crowded Gaiser Student Center on March 7. He had been invited to speak by the Associated Students of Clark College. West, a motivational speaker who works for the global charity Me to We, raised a half million dollars through his mountain climb last year for clean-water projects in drought-stricken Kenya. He said he wanted to share some of the lessons he learned through that experience with students at Clark.

One of those lessons was the importance of asking for help. West didn't climb Mt. Kilimanjaro himself—two of his good friends came with him and helped keep him going as he climbed 17,200 feet primarily on his own hands. In turn, he was able to help them when, near the summit, they became weakened by altitude sickness; West, it turned out, was one of those uncommon individuals not affected by altitude sickness, so he had the energy to encourage his friends during the final ascent.

The audience in Gaiser Student Center was clearly captured by West's story. When he played video of himself and his friends pushing through their exhaustion to finally reach the mountain's summit, the room erupted into loud cheers and applause, and several audience members could be seen wiping away tears.

West finished his speech by describing the manmade stacks of rock called "cairns" that other climbers had left along the trail to the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro—a way for climbers to tell each other that they were going the right way, and that someone had made it this far already. "We all have a capacity to be a cairn for other people," he said. "We all need to be the cairn for ourselves, for our friends, for our family, and for the world."

Photo: Clark College/Jenny Shadley