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## The Graduate: Vanessa O'Brien

BY TERESA BRUNO ON DECEMBER 11, 2020



*There cannot be failure unless one gives up – I know that for certain. – Vanessa O'Brien*

This month's edition of "The Graduate" features Vanessa O'Brien ('97), a British-American mountaineer, explorer, author and (of course) notable Stern grad! Among Vanessa's many achievements, she set a Guinness World Record by becoming the first woman to reach the Earth's highest (Mt. Everest 8,848m) and lowest (Challenger Deep 10,925m) points. Vanessa is the first American or British woman to successfully summit K2, the world's second-tallest mountain, has summited the highest peaks on every continent (the Seven Summits) in a 295 day span, and has skied the last degree to the north and south poles in 11 months ([Explorers Grand Slam](#)). Her inspirational story is one of perseverance, teamwork and empowerment. I corresponded with Vanessa while she was on a trip to Pakistan.

*Some answers have been edited for clarity.*

### What are you currently doing in Pakistan?

Pakistan is one of my favorite countries, and I am fortunate to be one of its Goodwill Ambassadors. I returned the Pakistan flag, which I took with me to Challenger Deep, to Pakistan's president, Dr. Arif Alvi.



*Vanessa presenting the Pakistan Flag taken to Challenger Deep to Pakistan President Dr. Arif Alvi*

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It was Nelson Mandela who said, "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair."

In that spirit, I have been speaking to students at schools in Pakistan, which has the world's largest youth population after Yemen. I was also meeting with business intermediaries like The Islamabad Chamber of Commerce or Pakistan-American Business Association to facilitate trade between nations. Pakistan is a low-cost producer of high-quality goods and services and the economic benefits to all parties of trade are enormous. Finally, if not for Covid-19 this year, I believe tourism would have started to take off in Pakistan because it has the largest concentration of the tallest mountains found anywhere in the world, and the longest glaciers found outside of the polar regions.



Vanessa speaking to students at Westminster School in Islamabad

**I understand that your upcoming book "To The Greatest Heights" is about your background and journey from business executive to mountaineer and explorer. What inspired this paradigm shift?**

At this point, I am in Hong Kong looking for *What To Do Next* against five key criteria I have crafted. Every idea, no matter how well intentioned, meets a dead-end against one criterion or another. Until one is uttered out loud – *in jest* – and once the proverbial penny drops, there is no turning back. The phrase was simple enough – **why not climb Mt. Everest?** It was a goal, I could measure success, it would take 2-3 years, it was not financial, and it was something I could sink my teeth into.

The only problem was that I didn't know how to climb.

This is where it gets interesting. I only saw climbing as a skill – and to me a skill could be learned, and therefore taught. What I didn't know was whether I would like it or be any good at it. That was my only thought process. Go find out where to learn this skill. I was never intimidated, although, the hard-core mountaineers were not always pleased to see someone succeeding who hadn't spent their life doing it.

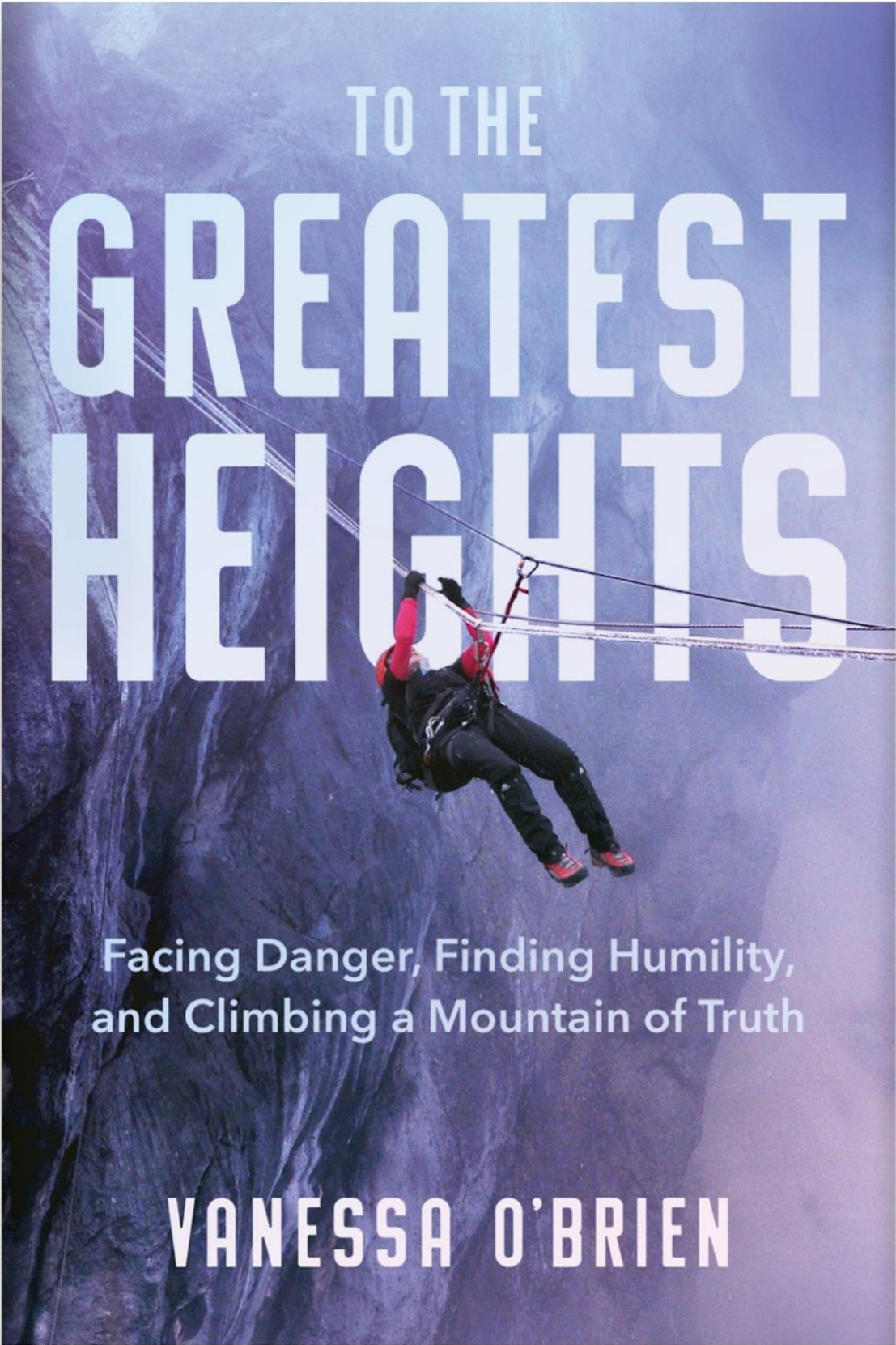
I became a much better mountaineer after I understood how powerful Mother Nature is and that I would never be in control of everything. In business, we are taught to always be in control, in nature, you are never always in control. Type-A people struggle with this, and the sooner they learn to let go, to focus on what they can control vs. what they cannot control (perhaps to know the difference), the easier it will be for them. While I speak of nature here, I am sure some people reading this will still think back to business.

For those interested in psychology, I open the chapter of Benjamin Hardy's new book, [Personality Isn't Permanent](#). This chapter finds me on Carstensen's Pyramid experiencing difficulty. I am frustrated as my old ways of thinking are no longer fit for purpose. As I continuously push myself way outside of my comfort zone, I eventually get to a point where my ego and old identity crack open, and only then, can real transformation in my life begin.

**For those interested in learning more about Vanessa's career transformation, she shares her story in "To The Greatest Heights", her forthcoming book (now on [pre-order on Amazon](#)). More about the book, in Vanessa's words:**

It really is a funny, unexpected, memoir, even if you don't like the outdoors! However, like all good business school genre – the book involves setting a goal and understanding risk. It just gets applied in a plot differently, on the back of the last Great Recession.





# TO THE GREATEST HEIGHTS

Facing Danger, Finding Humility,  
and Climbing a Mountain of Truth

VANESSA O'BRIEN

**Of everything that you have accomplished, what memory stands out the most to you?**

On average, the thing you work hardest for is always the thing you value the most. I worked hardest for K2, the upside being that I learned more about Pakistan, which wouldn't have happened if I parachuted in and out. Next is probably Everest, because it was my first mountain, and I was naïve. My Everest team is still the team I feel closest to because we really went through hell. Eventually what you do stops becoming about you, and it starts becoming about what you can give back. When you reach that point – adventure becomes exploration. It's a beautiful pivot point.

**How do you train/prepare for an expedition?**

The most important training for high-altitude mountaineering (a peak over 26,000 feet found only in the Himalayas or Karakoram) is to focus on how your body utilizes oxygen. Cardiovascular strength and endurance are very important. You want to set a pace you can keep for a long time. Trail running is good. Pilates and yoga are helpful for balance and stretching. Your body needs to be fit, but I wouldn't build too much muscle because when oxygen becomes a limited resource, your brain, heart and lungs must have that limited resource, and muscle will compete for that limited resource. If you can simulate what you will be doing by targeting that type of training, that is actually helpful. For example, if I am living in a city while training for a mountain climb, I will choose the tallest staircase and climb up and down those stairs over and over again, vary it by skipping stairs, adding a weighted vest, etc.



*Vanessa sporting her weighted vest for stairs training sessions.*

**What goes through your mind through the tedious hours it takes to summit mountains, ski to the poles or reach 10,925 meters undersea?**

In my book, *To The Greatest Heights*, I talk about what came to me during my first ascent and how it saved my summit. I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but it is important. When you are miserable, cold, hungry and tired your mind will start to wander in unhelpful ways. I think of this as the Angel and the Devil on the Shoulder. The bad guy is going to start all the downhill thinking – reminding you how miserable you are, how you should cut your losses, how you're higher than you've ever been before, that if you continue to go higher, you'll just have further to descend. This negative voice is very powerful and if you are weak, and you are very weak at this precise moment, this voice will win.

Your Angel must be stronger. Her words must lift your feet and your spirits higher. There is nothing keeping you going but... but what? "What" matters, and you better know what that is.

We climb at night because during the day the sun melts snow and glaciers causing avalanches –you cannot use your sight to clock the next rock or ledge. Singing is not helpful. You will get lost in lyrics and forget the words, which is perfect territory for the bad guys to come back in. Counting, however, is very helpful – especially if you are a left-brainer like me. I'm not sure how it happened, and I promise I never sang this before or after, but "99 Bottles of Beer" popped into my head at just the perfect moment. I can tell you what a really, really, really long song that is.





*Vanessa returning from the 11-hour voyage to Challenger Deep. Photo Credit: Enrique Alvarez*

**Can you describe a time when you were prevented from reaching one of your goals and what happened next?**

Probably my favorite is K2 Season 2 because of the outcome. I tell the longer story in a National Women's History Museum (NHHM) piece called [Mountains Have No Ceilings](#), but it goes something like this. A small team arrives at K2 Camp 3 and radios down to Camp 2 that an avalanche has just removed all our collective tents, oxygen, equipment and supplies. There are no accidents or loss of life. Everyone comes down to base camp.

The larger teams decide to maximize utility. Their economic loss is too great, the guides have already been paid and the clients secretly have an excuse not to climb. Net-Net – everyone is happy. The smaller teams, who have a larger risk appetite, are willing to stay after completing due diligence – they find the avalanche was not so new, and 68% of all summits (based on historical analysis) are ahead of them. Furthermore, there is an actual weather window to summit (based on historical and forecasted weather analysis).

But can these small expeditions stay? No. They cannot stay because the bulk of their teams consist of Sherpa, indigenous people from (primarily) Nepal, who reside at high altitude, and have learned how to guide foreigners to the mountain tops from their fathers and grandfathers. If these Sherpa are my age or older, they are either superstitious and believe the mountain is either a God or the God lives at the summit and has spoken through the avalanche not to continue. Had Jack Welch of GE-fame lived, I would have enjoyed a debate on motivating or rewarding behavior to rationalize superstition. I like to think accumulated snow is to a mountain what water is to a dog – when a mountain accumulates too much snow, it shakes and avalanches it off. When a dog gets wet, it too, shakes. Both shed the accumulated precipitation and hopefully you are not standing in front of either one of them.

Younger Sherpa are not necessarily superstitious, fall into any cohort below Gen X and want to maximize rewards. They quickly assess the situation, know they have been paid, see everyone going home, don't see the incentive of working for a summit bonus that may or may not happen as particularly lucrative. They feel more entitled than the previous generation and want to get paid more for less work.

Alas, this mountain story becomes a beautiful business puzzle with typical human behavioral problems. The crescendo occurs when two women leading expeditions meet the most senior military liaison officer requesting to stay and he asks whether it is true that the only two expeditions willing to stay are the only two expeditions led by women.



*Vanessa with Kami Sherpa, whom she climbed K2 and Shishapangma with*



**I read on your website that you raised the UN Women's Flag at the summit of K2 "to show the power of women's courage and determination" – elaborate on that choice and your charity efforts.**

Absolutely, although it wasn't charity, it was clarity. I did not have a commercial sponsor, although I did try. It seemed the risk was too high, even for those who had risk in their taglines. I thought to myself, *if I am going to write this check*, what matters to me are climate and gender equality. I knew I was going to take glacier samples (in partnership with the US Geological Survey in Denver), so I started thinking about how I could use my climbing to bring awareness to gender equality, the other issue.

People think gender equality problems are "over there". What people don't know is that equal rights between men and women are NOT enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. To this day, the right to vote is the only right guaranteed to women in the U.S. Constitution. The ERA passed Congress in 1972 and was sent to the states for ratification, but by the deadline passed in 1982, the ERA was just three states shy of the 38 necessary. I believe women need courage and determination in every country.

I wasn't a big enough 'star' for UN Women in New York City, but UN Women in Pakistan embraced me, put a flag in my hand, and, more importantly, refused to take the flag back believing I would eventually take it to the summit. I can barely tell that story without getting choked up. Finally, in the third consecutive year, my team was the only one to summit. When people want to know what drives me – it is stories like this, when people refuse to give up, and refuse to take flags back, and believe in you, that drive me to the summits of mountains. There cannot be failure unless one gives up – I know that for certain.



*Vanessa with the UN Women's flag on the summit of K2*

**Now for our rapid fire questions:**

- **What's one word that describes you?** Focused
- **Item you can't live without on a trek?** SteriPEN UV water purifiers
- **Favorite summitting snack?** Espresso Love Gu Sports Energy Gel
- **Favorite time of day while exploring?** Early morning before the heat
- **Where did you spend the Covid lockdown?** Verplanck, NY or Expedition to Challenger Deep via Guam
- **What's one thing that you can't do that you want to learn?** To go to Space
- **If you can meet anyone alive or dead who would it be?** Sir David Attenborough
- **Who is the most important person (or persons) in your life?** My husband, Jonathan O'Brien

**Take us back to your time at Stern, what inspired you to go to business school? How do you think the experience helped shape you personally and professionally?**

I was in the Financial Management Program at GE Capital. I was privileged to learn from Jack Welch the importance of speed, simplicity and self-confidence.

GE was big on continuous learning and invested in its own Corporate leadership programs in Crotonville, NY. GE also sponsored me for my Executive MBA (EMBA) after I received GE's Pinnacle Award for Outstanding Achievement. My experience with Stern was fantastic because in business school we were put in cross-functional teams where I really saw how important teamwork is for the completion of a project – perhaps to the point where projects could not be completed by any one individual alone. There are very few things we accomplish without other people, and that's true even today. I don't solo mountain tops – I am always part of a team – even if it is just me plus one. The best you can do is seek someone who complements your strengths and counterbalances your weaknesses.



*Vanessa addressing diplomats at the Serena Hotel in Islamabad*



**Are there any specific memories from the MBA experience that you can share?**

I remember, or at least attribute to Stern, having a class or grade recorded as the sum of the team. This was profound at the time because it provoked the strongest in a subject to take time to pull up the weakest in a subject so as to pull up the average. If your grade is going to be the average of individuals in a Group, you are incentivizing the Group to do well rather than individuals to perform. It mimics business, by the way, or should (unless you run a trading desk), where there is a cascading of individual performance, team performance, business unit performance and ultimately group performance. All of it gets rolled up and needs to be measured because, what gets measured, gets improved.

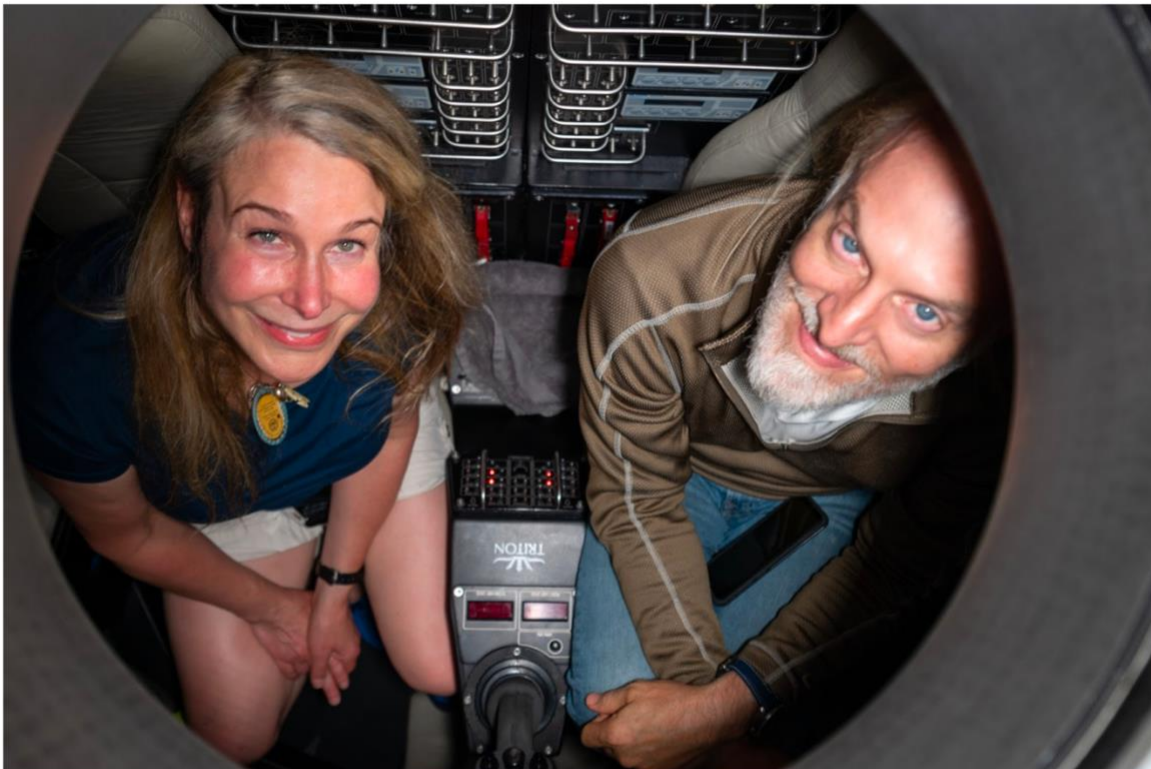
**Is there a motto or a piece of wisdom/advice that you live by?**

"Find something you like to do that does not require the applause of others."

—Ali MacGraw, actress, recounting the best advice that her mother gave her

**What advice do you have for Sternies today?**

1. Be confident – you are always right about, at a minimum, how you feel.
2. You can't fail if you don't give up.
3. Never forget your safety net, which sits on your back like an invisible backpack, filled with all of your cumulative skills, knowledge and experience that you have accumulated in life. **No one can take this away from you.** Knowing it is there allows you to pivot and take calculated risks because you can always go back – but imagine what lies ahead!
4. Be decisive! Making decisions is at the heart of leadership, as is clarity. Not making a decision is, in fact, a decision itself. The worst thing that can happen with a decision is a data point – then you know what to do.



*Vanessa and Victor Vescovo in position before their 11-hour dive to Challenger Deep on June 12, 2020. Photo Credit: Enrique Alvarez*

**What adventure, literal and/or figurative are you tackling next?**

Literally my book and figuratively finding the next adventure frontier – I am always up for suggestions! Could it be Space? Maybe I could find one of the great shipwrecks like Shackleton's *Endurance* – filled with fabulous tales of leadership to tell, or...

**Want to learn more about Vanessa? Visit her website (<https://vobonline.com/>) or read her forthcoming book "To The Greatest Heights"**