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Lisa Densmore Ballard

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Climbers as Humanitarians

Helping injured migrants in Mexico

Lisa Densmore Ballard



PICO DE ORIZABA CALLED TO ME WHEN I FIRST SAW IT IN NOVEMBER 2017, while driving into Tlachichuca, Mexico. I looked up its northwestern flank and wanted to stand on top of its white cone. It beckoned, cool and refreshing, framed by an azure sky, miles from where I stood. Around me, heat waves rose from the pavement and dust devils swirled among the cornstalk pyramids by the village gate. I realized I must not underestimate this alpine goliath.

Pico de Orizaba (18,491 feet) is the third highest mountain in North America, after Denali in Alaska and Mount Logan in the Canadian Yukon. Located in Mexico's volcanic belt, on the border of the states of Veracruz and Puebla, Orizaba rises prominently from a pancake-flat patchwork of corn and cactus in central Mexico. Like Africa's Kilimanjaro, Orizaba dominates the landscape, drawing the eye.

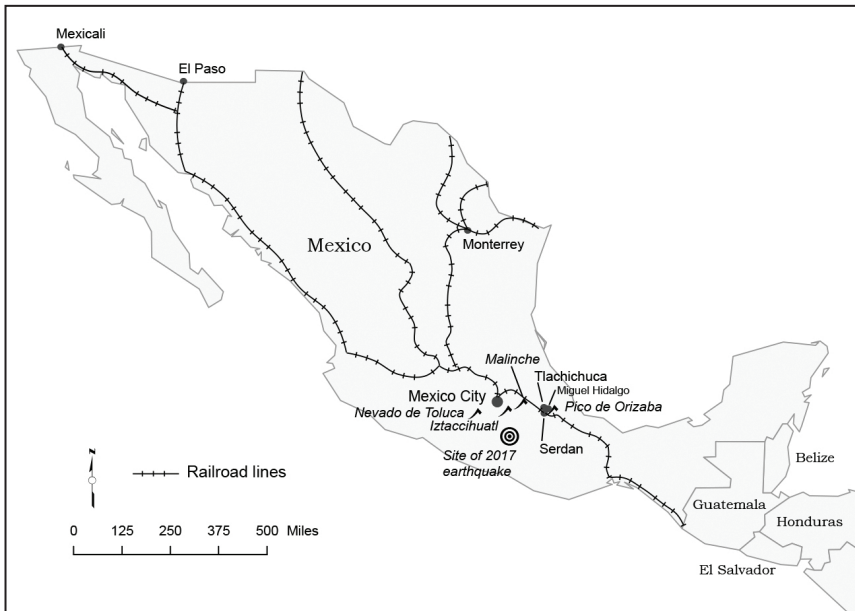
Also called Citlaltépetl ("Star Mountain") in the local Nahuatl-Aztec language, Orizaba is one of only three mountains in Mexico with permanent snowfields. Nine glaciers cover the peak, including the country's largest, Gran Glaciar Norte, which spills down its northern side. The upper mountain can be skied, which intrigues me because I am a professional skier besides being an avid trekker and occasional mountaineer. When the invitation came to visit central Mexico, including a hike to base camp on Pico de Orizaba at 14,000 feet, I booked my plane ticket.

My attraction to that volcano was secondary to the reason I traveled to Mexico. Our group went because we wanted to help the Mexican Red Cross in the wake of the September 19, 2017, earthquake. While international headlines focused on a ravaged Mexico City, the state of Puebla reeled. Of the 220 cities, towns, and villages in Puebla, 212 of them sustained severe damage.

The invitation came from John Markowitz, an emergency room technician at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, New Hampshire. He has traveled to the volcanic region of Mexico off and on since 1999. He initially went there to climb Pico de Orizaba. Over the last two decades, he climbed Orizaba three times and scaled Iztaccihuatl (17,160 feet) twice, La Malinche (14,639 feet) three times, and the rattlesnake-ridden, sulfurous Nevado de Toluca (15,390 feet).

In a mere month, John acquired a grant through the Hitchcock Foundation and a private local philanthropist to fund our humanitarian mission. During

Climbers bought this used Unimog ambulance for Red Cross workers. LISA DENSMORE BALLARD



The climbers originally aimed to help victims of the 2017 earthquake southeast of Mexico City but ended up assisting injured migrants in the Tlachichuca area. The main train lines show where migrants try to hitch rides into the United States, often leading to serious injuries. While in Mexico, of course, the climbers felt the call to trek on Pico de Orizaba. LARRY GARLAND/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

that time, he also recruited Dave Foster, an electrical engineer from Hanover, New Hampshire, and three firefighters from three nearby fire stations: Charlie Barker from Lebanon, Chris Sweitzer from Hanover, and Tom Ritland from Hartford, Vermont.

In addition to their professional skills, our team members were also at home in the high country. Dave had hiked throughout New Hampshire's White Mountains. Charlie had rock-climbed for 30 years in the Northeast and in Joshua Tree National Park. Chris was an avid hiker and backcountry skier. Tom had accompanied John to Mexico in 2004 to climb La Malinche and Pico de Orizaba and to help the Mexican Red Cross with the ongoing challenges related to undocumented migrants.

Each year, 100,000 men, women, and children, typically from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, jump onto cargo trains, which they call "the beasts," near the southern border of Mexico, hoping to ride the trains 2,400

miles north to the United States. It's a two-month journey holding on to the roof or a narrow grate between the speeding train cars, in the scorching sun. The lucky ones find shelter in an empty boxcar for a few days. The less lucky fall off and get seriously injured. What's more, bandits sometimes hijack the trains and kidnap the migrants. Though we embarked on our journey expecting to help earthquake victims, our mission became dedicated to these desperate travelers.

Laden with \$5,000 in medical equipment, solar ovens, and school supplies, we checked into Servimont, a walled compound in the center of the city of Tlachichuca and a haven for climbers. The owner, Gerardo Reyes Carlín, a medical doctor and one of the better-known climbers in the region, greeted us warmly. John, who had stayed at Servimont on numerous occasions and was a personal friend of Gerardo, immediately sank into one of the wood-frame chairs in the sitting room of the two-story dorm. He was home.

"We could have stayed in a hotel somewhere, but I thought you would feel more comfortable here," he said. "I just love this place!"

INDEED. SERVIMONT IS PART APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB HUT, PART mountaineering museum, and part family farmyard. A century of climbing paraphernalia, photographs, posters, patches, and stickers from various American outing clubs hung from walls and ledges around the dormant vats, massive brick furnace, and steam-powered boiler system of the former soap factory.

Outside, blooming calla lilies and poinsettia bushes perked up the otherwise gray courtyard. The lodge dominated one wall of the enclosure. Several four-wheel-drive vehicles purred by the heavy metal doors, picking up or dropping off climbers. Clangs emanated from the workshop by the entrance, where everything from climbing gear to the trucks and household items were repaired. The dog kennel for the Gerardo's three gentle Dobermans stood next to several empty animal stalls across the neatly mowed grass. Other stone-paved passageways led to a woodpile, a former candle factory converted into another guest room, the Reyes' family quarters, the kitchen, and a garden.

The compound has been in Gerardo's family for 150 years. His grandfather José was the first to summit Pico de Orizaba by the north route. During the 1930s José guided others up the route, using horses to travel to the base of the mountain. In the 1940s, Gerardo's father, Francisco, also guided climbers, and now Gerardo runs the mountaineering business, which also rents gear to climbers.

“We stored corn here,” Gerardo said as he sat in the dining room one evening. “Corn filled this room to the ceiling. It’s all been refinished.”

I glanced up. Large, hand-hewn pine beams supported the whitewashed ceiling. Three saddles filled the far corner next to a table adorned with a photo of Gerardo’s mother, food, and calla lilies in the Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead holiday. His grandmother’s orange and black clay cooking pots hung above the door to the kitchen, and a bright yellow Aztec pattern framed the oversized portal into another sitting room. There was no evidence of earthquake damage.

“Servimont has 2-foot-thick walls,” Gerardo said. “The vehicles moved back and forth, but the buildings got only a few cracks.”

After dinner, while we sorted gear in the common area, a poster for the 2004 Mexican-Ambulance Climbing Project caught my eye. The poster featured Phil and Susan Ershler, the first couple to climb the Seven Summits (the highest peaks on each continent). It publicized their presentation at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center to help raise money for an ambulance operating near Tlachichuca. By no coincidence, John and Tom had climbed Pico de Orizaba together the same year. When I questioned John, he revealed a remarkable story.

In 1999, John hiked a section of the Appalachian Trail from North Adams, Massachusetts, to Grafton Notch, Maine, with Arthur “Sonny” Demers, a legendary Nordic skier from Eastman, New Hampshire. After their multiday backpacking trip, John and Sonny wanted another challenge.

“We decided against trekking in Nepal, and Sonny wanted to reach a summit,” John said. “Mexico was more affordable. We wanted to do something humanitarian, too. We ended up in a flooded region that got 30 inches of rain in 36 hours. We could see huge mud scars in the valleys when we were climbing. We were scared of the shadows, but we went to a warehouse to sort food and clothing donated through Rotary. It was surreal. You could see it on TV, and there we were.”

John and Sonny also learned that it would cost \$2,000 to rebuild each of the homes damaged by the flood, a modest amount by American standards but an impossible sum for most Mexicans, particularly in rural areas. Upon returning to the United States, they raised more than \$2,000, giving slide shows of their successful climb up Pico de Orizaba and the flood damage they saw. They sent the \$2,000 to Mexico but didn’t know what to do with the little bit of extra money they had raised.

“I went back to Mexico, using my own money, and met with Gerardo,” John said. Gerardo showed John a letter from the Mexican Red Cross appointing Gerardo director for the agency’s north slope of Pico de Orizaba, “but the title came with no money, no personnel and no ambulance.”

The idea of providing an ambulance for Gerardo’s search-and-rescue efforts held great appeal for John. If he could get a group together to climb Orizaba and build a donation of \$250 per person into the cost of the trip, it would be enough to buy a used one. But the ambulance had to be a high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicle that could navigate the washed out, steep two-track road that wound up the lower mountain.

A climbing couple appealed to the Dartmouth community for funds to buy an ambulance.

“I thought it was a crazy idea at first, but once you say you’re going to do it, it’s public,” he said. “I talked to a few people, and they said yes! Sixteen people came on that trip. Then Gerardo got a lead on a Unimog in Arizona that we thought would work. I took out a banknote to cover the balance we didn’t raise.”

Unimogs were developed by the Germans during World War II as all-terrain vehicles. They resemble covered, square-backed pickup trucks. The name *Unimog* is an acronym for the German term *Universal Motor Gerät* (“Gerät” means “machine”). The circa-1960 Unimog for sale in Arizona had been used as a construction trailer. It could handle the terrain around Orizaba but needed to be converted into an ambulance. It also needed a water pump, new tires, brakes, and other repairs. The tires alone cost \$1,200. The presentation at Dartmouth by the Ershlers spurred the donations to help cover these additional costs.

After John and Gerardo purchased the Unimog, Gerardo and his family drove the vehicle across the border. When the Unimog finally reached central Mexico, however, it did not go to Tlachichuca. The keys ended up at the Red Cross headquarters in nearby Serdan, where it remains today and where it is used primarily for rescuing injured migrants.

“I thought the Unimog was going to be used both for mountain rescue and to help migrants,” John said. “At first I was annoyed, but now I’m happy to see the ambulance is being used basically as I envisioned, helping local people.”

The next morning, the Unimog arrived at Servimont to take us to Serdan. At Red Cross headquarters, the firefighters spread the medical gear on a long table. The Red Cross personnel were like kids on Christmas when they saw the piles of stethoscopes, heart-rate and blood monitors, tourniquets, finger clips, and other much-needed ambulance necessities. The room emanated with joy and gratitude. No surprise. If the Unimog was any indication, the Red Cross in Serdan was severely undersupplied. The ambulance contained only a stretcher, a few bandages, and one canister of oxygen, quite a contrast to the emergency medical vehicles in the United States.

After going through the medical supplies, we adjourned to a small outdoor courtyard where John set up one of the solar ovens. A group of Red Cross youth volunteers joined us to learn how to cook eggs without water. As John



John Markowitz shows Red Cross volunteers and staff how to use a solar oven.

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and Charlie entertained the crowd, I noticed a teenage boy in a wheelchair apart from the others. He sat under a tree with a tall, middle-aged woman. The boy had no legs below his knees. His name was Mertir. The year before, at age 17, he'd jumped on a train in Honduras with his brother and cousin. They got off at San Andres, a deserted depot near Serdan where the Red Cross maintains one of its seven migrant shelters; the next night Mertir fell while trying to climb onto another train. A woman who lives near the railroad tracks (and who has helped migrants her entire life) found him and called the Red Cross. Vowing to stick with Mertir, his brother and cousin got off the train as soon as they could, but the authorities immediately deported them back to Honduras.

After Mertir's surgeries, Mariana, the woman with him at Red Cross headquarters, agreed to be his foster mother until he was deemed fit enough by the Mexican authorities to go home.

"There is no American dream," Mariana said. "The migrants believe it but don't realize it's not a promise. It's difficult to make it in the United States when you have no education, no family there, and no contacts."

With Mariana's encouragement, Mertir was learning how to function in a country that has no disabilities laws, and he was learning carpentry and music, giving him a chance to earn a living. He can stay in Mexico until he heals because he has a full-time caregiver acting as a foster parent. Mariana hoped to raise money to get prosthetic legs for him, though that would be a huge hurdle in such a poor part of the world.

"He has such spirit," Mariana said, proudly. "It's a miracle he's alive. I have a passion for helping migrants. Some people pretend [migrants] don't exist even if they're hurt. I just can't leave them."

Later that day, we rode in the Unimog to San Andres to see the Red Cross shelter. Immediately on observing the wool blankets on the cold stone floor, the firefighters decide to build bunk beds, which turned into a multiday project and allowed Mertir to show his skill with a saw.

It was also the first of five days, loitering around the shelter, waiting for trains and looking for migrants in need of aid. The days were long and hot, and the train "schedule" really amounted to wishful thinking—yet the Red Cross personnel never wavered. At the sound of a train whistle, they were ready to toss water bottles to thirsty stowaways. If the Unimog started (it was as unreliable as the trains), we sometimes raced alongside the tracks or over farm roads to reach another deserted platform before a train got there.

Periodically, we spotted abandoned clothing or bedding on a grate between the cars or on the back of a caboose, evidence of migrants who likely fell off, their whereabouts and their condition an unsolvable mystery.

“Waiting for trains is like waiting for a fire call,” observed Tom, gazing at Pico de Orizaba from the tracks outside the San Andres depot. “You might be at the station for six hours without a call. It’s so unpredictable.”

WE HAD NOT FORGOTTEN ABOUT THE GREAT VOLCANO. ON OUR DAY off, we welcomed the chance to hike to base camp on Pico de Orizaba. Our destination is formally known as the Piedra Grande huts. There are two of them, a small yellow Quonset hut with sleeping shelves for eight, and a larger stone building, with large sleeping platforms for 30-plus, and a rough counter on which to set a cookstove.

After breakfast, one of Gerardo’s drivers took us from Servimont into the national park surrounding Pico de Orizaba. En route to the trailhead, we stopped in the remote village of Miguel Hidalgo at 10,670 feet. Word of our arrival spread quickly. Soon the entire village poured into the field where we had parked. Charlie distributed soccer balls, Halloween candy, and school supplies to kids. John delivered a box of knit hats to Carlos, one of Gerardo’s guides who lived in the village.

Carlos accompanied us on our hike. We drove another hour slowly up a road so eroded I felt seasick from the bumping and jostling, but once on the trail, I reveled in the exercise and fresh air. We ascended steadily for two miles through an airy forest of Montezuma pine. The bunchgrass on both sides of the path made the footing uneven, but not so much that I couldn’t gaze up now and again at the stately 80-foot tree trunks. Though past the growing season, pink and prickly coneflowers adorned the meadows among the trees.

We broke out of the timber onto a rough dirt road then followed a more obvious path, climbing higher and higher. The peak loomed above us. It seemed to grow as the air thinned. About a quarter-mile below the huts, the route continued atop an old concrete aqueduct of marginal integrity. Exposed rebar and cavernous holes demanded more and more of my attention the closer we got to the huts, but finally, we arrived.

A group of skiers from Alaska were packing up their tents and skis as I swung my day pack off my back.

“How was it?” I asked.

“Worst snow I’ve ever skied,” one of the Alaskans said. “The conditions were really icy.”

November is perhaps the worst time to ski Orizaba because it receives little snow over the summer and fall, and what’s there frequently freezes and thaws. In fact, the mountain showed an even less friendly side a mere two weeks after our visit. Gerardo informed us by email in late November 2017 that an American climber had died trying to ski down the icy glacier from the top.

“He fell 2,500 feet to his death, on the west face,” Gerardo wrote to me. The climber had been with an American guide. Servimont staffers found his remains the next day. Gerardo’s note went on: “Sunday, two more fell. Carlos [and two other Servimont guides] brought them down, but [those two suffered] only injuries. A lot of work and expenses that nobody pays for. Fortunately, none of my customers were injured. Thank God.”

Gerardo is like many climbers in his willingness to help others in the mountains. In 1970 the mountaineer H. Adams “Ad” Carter (1914–1995) recruited a dozen of his alpinist colleagues to go to the Cordillera Blanca in the Peruvian Andes to rescue victims of an earthquake that had buried 25,000 people under a massive landslide. The Carter Glacier there was named after him to honor this humanitarian effort. In 1998, high-altitude filmmaker David Breashears used proceeds from his Imax film, *Everest*, to bring electricity to a Sherpa village in the Himalaya. The Alex Lowe Foundation, founded in 2003 by Lowe’s widow, Jennifer, supports the Khumbu Climbing Center, where, to date, 1,000 indigenous people have learned climbing skills, English, mountain search-and-rescue, and first aid.

Climbers often find themselves touched by the struggles of those who live in the mountains. In 2008, while climbing Kilimanjaro, I met a fireman who trekked up that entire 20,000-footer in his heavy, flame-retardant firefighting uniform, including the hat, to raise money for burn victims. I once sent soccer balls, a pump, schoolbooks, dictionaries, and two-dozen T-shirts to a village in Ethiopia’s Simien Mountains after trekking up four 14,000-footers there. Closer to home, almost every rescue on any New England peak is staffed by an army of local volunteers willing to lend their energy and outdoor skills to those in need. And this is only a handful of examples of the innumerable humanitarian efforts by climbers during the last 150 years.

Helping others is how many mountaineers are wired. Unquestionably climbers tend to be highly focused and goal-oriented, sometimes beyond

reason and safety, when ascending a mountain. It's on the approach to that peak and especially after the feat that their humanitarian sides emerge. Does that urge to help well up because some of the biggest peaks are located in parts of the world where residents live with much less than Americans do? Or is this willingness to give back simply one's duty as a human being? It's certainly as rewarding as reaching any summit. Maybe more so.

"In the mountains, you're close to the earth," John said. "There is a grounded-ness to that, a sense of awareness. You see local people when you climb, like farmers who get their hands in the dirt. Climbers get their hands in the dirt, too. You're in tune with the weather and the elements, like they are. Nature speaks to you. It makes you feel alive, and with that comes a sensitivity to other people's needs."

A longtime member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, LISA DENSMORE BALLARD is an award-winning writer, photographer, and filmmaker. She splits her time between Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York, when she's not exploring a wild part of the world. Learn more at lisaballardoutdoors.com. See her story on an adventure with her son on page 56.