

A NOLS student learns to ice climb. — Submitted photo

Adventures in learning and leadership

St. John's outdoorsman Shawn Stratton writes book about career as expedition guide and teacher

By TARA BRADBURY
THE TELEGRAM

It's 3:30 p.m., deep in the Himalayan mountain range just west of India's second-highest peak, Nanda Devi, and I'm standing with my co-instructor listening to a strange moaning sound. It seems to be coming from the drainage area sloping 300 feet upward away from our campsite. At first I think students have hiked up to where the area narrows into a canyon and are flogging around, making echoes, but as I move toward the noise, it begins to resemble at one moment that of a drunken shepherd, the next, an injured wild animal. I start running, listening intently, and it suddenly dawns on me that what I'm hearing are bloodcurdling cries for help.

This is how Shawn Stratton begins the book about his experiences as a leader on wilderness expeditions; the cries, he discovered, were from Mike, one of his students. Having left his group to get water from a mountain stream, Mike had fallen down an embankment, snapping his leg across a rock. Cold, wet and unable to move, he was culling for help.

Stratton found himself that day, as he often did, switching between teacher and medical care provider, as he directed the group in collecting splinting materials and treating Mike's leg — an open fracture with the bone visible and protruding — wrapping him up and keeping him safe until a help arrived via helicopter, a day later.

Stratton, of St. John's, spent 15 years on wilderness expeditions, 10 of them as an instructor with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS).

Founded in 1965 and based in the United States, NOLS students go on expeditions to remote wilderness areas and learn outdoor skills, leadership and environmental ethics.

The outdoors was a literal classroom without walls, Stratton explains, and his work took him backpacking, mountaineering and kayaking in more than 25 countries, including Nepal, Ecuador, Thailand, Kenya and Iceland.

Stratton first learned of NOLS while completing a degree in outdoor education at Dalhousie University, and decided on the spot that one day he'd work there.

"For me, it was the perfect balance," he says of his time as a NOLS instructor. "I was in a job where I felt like I was utilizing all my skills. I felt like I was challenged, but I also felt like I was contributing and it was very, very rewarding in terms of



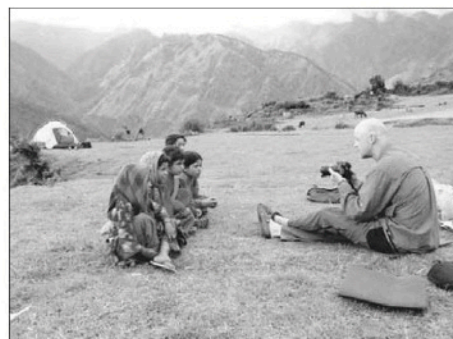
(Above) Shawn Stratton speaks at a 2012 TEDx event in St. John's. (Right) Stratton captures an image of children in a remote village in Pindari Valley, India, after playing a game of kickball. — Submitted photos

spending time in the wilderness. I love the idea of connecting and dealing with what's in front of you. You can't worry about your bank account, you can't worry about all the stuff that goes on; when you're out there, you're carrying your home on your back, and you rely on each other."

In the back of his mind, Stratton had a plan to one day write a book about his experiences in the wild.

Having retired from NOLS and moved back to St. John's about five years ago — where he now lives with his wife and two small daughters — he decided to give it a go.

With the help of editors, he has put together and published "Teams on the Edge: Stories and Lessons from Wilderness Expeditions," a half-memoir, half-business-management book and collection of some of his most memorable and dramatic experiences outdoors with his students.



Along with his experience with Mike, there are stories of coming back to camp in Alaska to find it shredded to pieces by a black bear, a student's blistered toe which ended up becoming septic, requiring emergency care, and being nearly stranded in the Homathko Icefield in B.C.'s Coast Range Mountains with the

possibility of no more rations for five days.

At the end of each story, Stratton shares a leadership and team-building lesson, which he says can be used in the wilderness, workplace or school.

The book, while giving an overview of NOLS and its goals, is an account of some of Stratton's person-

al experiences and not specifically about the leadership school.

Still, just after finishing writing, he received a cease and desist letter from NOLS, saying it would take legal action if he published the book and citing concerns with proprietary information and intellectual property.

Stratton attempted to explain the goal of the book was to share his experiences in the wilderness, and even sent NOLS executives a copy of the manuscript to read and edit out whatever they thought was inappropriate, to no avail.

A few weeks later they came back and said, "We still stand by our cease and desist letter," he explains. "It was unfortunate because I was really picturing selling the book in the alumni magazine" — there are 200,000 NOLS alumni in North America, Stratton says, and no instructor has ever published a book about their adventures before — "and partnering with them and giving proceeds to them. I'm not a disgruntled employee, by any means — I love the company and I think in the end it will be more marketing for them."

Stratton consulted a lawyer in the United States before publishing his book, who confirmed that he isn't breaking any laws and has the right to share his stories.

Stratton hopes the book will appeal to adventurers and aspiring adventurers, as well as leadership groups, whether schools, universities or in the corporate world.

He has already been approached by a number of high schools and colleges across the continent, asking to include the book in their curriculum.

Though no longer teaching in his outdoor classrooms, Stratton is a triathlete and has established his own company, LiveMore Group, through which he delivers presentations on self-discovery and conducts team-building and leadership retreats for small and large businesses — lessons, he says, that are as relevant and useful in the boardroom as in the Himalayas.

Stratton will launch "Teams on the Edge" with a reception at Quidi Vidi Brewery Tuesday from 4:30-6:30 p.m. He'll show pictures and share stories of the book's development as well as read an excerpt. Finger food will be provided and books will be available for purchase.

"Teams on the Edge" is also available at Outfitters on Water Street in St. John's, and on Amazon and other online bookstores.