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January 14, 2009 | Category: *Women Who Inspire*

## Helen Thayer: Adventurer and Educator Extraordinaire

By Tammy Sapp

Exceptional people invariably share two traits. They know a smart risk when they see one and once they decide to tackle it, they don't give up. Ever. That sums up Helen Thayer to a T.

Helen, named "One of the Great Explorers of the 20th Century" by National Geographic, defines the phrase, living life to its fullest. She was the first woman to walk and ski alone to the magnetic North Pole and circumnavigate the area. She also was the first woman to walk across the Sahara and Gobi Deserts and was the first non-Indian to kayak 1,200 miles along two rivers in a remote area of the Amazon rain forest. If that isn't impressive enough, she accomplished all this since her 50th birthday.

This Washington State resident wasn't sitting on the sofa watching soap operas prior to turning 50, though. Far from it. She's an accomplished altitude climber, having started in her native New Zealand with her parents at age 9. She's also an international athlete and represented three countries (New Zealand, Guatemala and the United States) in track and field from 1965 to 1975 and was a U.S. national champion in luge. Obviously no stranger to success, the best was yet to come for Helen as she found a way to educate and enrich the lives of others.

"In 1986, I climbed Peak Communism in Tajikistan. As I stood on the 24,590 summit, and marveled at the view, I knew the time had come to share my experiences with others," Helen said.

Back at base camp, the idea of an educational program that would allow Helen to share her photography, writing and explorations came together and the Adventure Classroom was born. Her goal was simple: use her future expeditions to create educational programs for students. The program would inspire young people to reach beyond themselves and live life without limits and plan to win.

Helen chose the magnetic North Pole as the first program. Her plans included living with the Inuit people, polar bears and other wildlife as she walked and skied alone to the Pole. Her bestselling book, *Polar Dream* documents her experiences on that journey.

"When I walked to the Pole alone in 1988, the second part of my life began - as a writer and a speaker," she said.

Many thousands of miles later, including treks across the Canadian Yukon and Northwest Territories; Death Valley, Mojave and Sonoran Deserts; Antarctica; Alaska; and New Zealand, Helen has accomplished something she's most proud of. As a lecturer for her nonprofit organization Adventure Classroom, she has reached more than a million students with her experiences in studying wolves, caribou and other wildlife as well as fascinating habitats and cultures throughout the world. Helen has an important take home message for her students.

"If the students remember nothing else, I want them to realize the importance of setting goals, planning to reach them and then being persistent until they get there."

Helen is a woman who enjoys a challenge and is fortunate to have shared some of her adventures with husband Bill. Like many couples who share a common passion, their giving to others through Adventure Classroom expeditions has brought them gifts as well.

"Bill and I are never more together than when we're on one of our trips," Helen said. "It draws us closer as we're working together as a team. That's not what a lot of married couples experience now but that's what we do. And we've been

married for 47 years now so I guess it works."

While reading about Helen's adventures, it's easy to gloss over the pain, thirst, weariness, injuries, extreme weather and other challenges she has faced. But that's the reality of extremes when you're trekking thousands of miles across mountains and deserts.

"When things are tough, I think of myself at the end, taking my last step. I see myself being victorious. If you dwell on quitting, you'll quit," she said. "I've realized I can go to another level of tiredness, that I'm not there yet."

At home in Washington State, when Helen isn't taking care of her menagerie of rescued dogs, cats, goats and a donkey, she's busy planning her next expedition. At 71, she plans to repeat her 1,500-mile walk through Death Valley, Mojave and the American and Mexican Sonoran Deserts. She would also like to explore Bhutan as well as study giant pandas in the mountainous areas of southwest China. Whatever she does, Helen will continue to break boundaries and set new records.

"My journeys are like life itself. We all have our North Poles and Gobi Deserts, but we can all reach our goals just as I did, one step at a time, never giving up on ourselves. If we reach for the top and believe we can do it, we can make our dreams come true."

For more information, visit [www.helenthayer.com](http://www.helenthayer.com)