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Resources

► [Safety](#)

► [Pressroom](#) (web)

► [Ask the CEO](#)

► [CEO Forum](#)

► [Employee Recognition](#)

► [Employee Activities](#)

► [Metro Projects](#)

► [Facts at a Glance](#)
(web)

► [Archives](#)

► [Events Calendar](#)

► [Research Center/ Library](#)

► [Metro Classifieds](#)

► [Bazaar](#)

Metro Info

► [30/10 Initiative](#)

► [Policies](#)

► [Training](#)

► [Help Desk](#)

► [Intranet Policy](#)

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Mountain-climbing Metro Bus Operator Gerardo Perez on top of Mt. McKinley in Alaska.



Metro's Gerardo Perez Takes Adventure to New Heights

- Mountain climbing bus operator eyes international peaks

By JORI STERN

Calling all mountain climbers! If you're looking for something adventurous to do on a weekend or just happen to have 40 hours a week to train, then you might want to give Operator Gerardo Perez a call over at West Valley Division 8.

A moderate hiker, Perez, who has always enjoyed camping, hiking, and fishing was inspired by his brother to take up mountain climbing seven years ago. Perez's first feat was Mt. Whitney, a 14,491-foot peak in California's Sierra Nevada, which he has now climbed seven times.

Perez admits he doesn't quite understand what draws him there. Every time he attempts to climb Mt. Whitney he says to himself, "I am not going to do this mountain again, but I keep going back." It must be all the nice people Perez says he meets climbing.

Although most of his climbs have been on the West Coast, Perez's next climbs will be international.

He wants to climb the highest peak in different countries, starting with the Chimborazo, a volcanic mountain in the Andes. It is Ecuador's highest

peak at a height of 20,700 feet. He also wants to climb Cotopaxi. At 19,388 feet, it is Ecuador's tallest active volcano.

Perez is returning to Denali National Park in Alaska in June. He was injured there in June 2005. Ironically, it really had nothing to do with climbing. He was injured playing baseball.

Due to bad weather at the medical camp, climbers decided to pull out a plastic baseball bat and ball and play baseball. Perez ran, slipped, and pulled a hamstring. He was eventually airlifted off the mountain.



Gerardo Perez reaches the summit of el Pico de Orizaba in Mexico.

Intimidated by climbing

Perez admits that a lot of people are intimidated at the thought of mountain climbing without having done it. "How are you ever going to know if you don't try."

So how does he keep in shape and prepared to conquer those mountains?

On average, Perez runs three to four times a week, 40-50 miles a week, and hits the gym twice a week. To prepare for the weather conditions and the days of solitude he'll find when he actually does the climb, he takes four- to five-hour hikes in the local mountains.

Perez uses his weekends to go climbing or running. He gets five weeks' vacation that he likes to spread out so he can make at least two to three big trips per year. "When you want something, you make the time."

What about a fear of losing his life up there? Perez has only felt that once. While climbing Mt. Baldy this year with a friend, Perez started back down the mountain. He slipped and was heading for a 2,000-foot drop.

His biggest fear while he was sliding was not falling off the mountain, but hitting a tree or rock. Luckily for Perez, he had his ice axe with him, which got caught in the snow on the side of the mountain. Within seconds, he came to a full halt.

Left hanging there, Perez managed to climb back up, but "it was very scary, and my heart was pounding like there was no end."

The ultimate payoff

The ultimate payoff for Perez would be 29,028-foot Mt. Everest in Tibet. Physically, he knows he can do it, but the cost for the climb alone can

reach \$65,000. Priorities come first, though, and that's his family.

So what does Perez's wife think of all this? According to him, "she is very supportive."

But after 15 years, the occasional thought does come to mind – what if you don't come back. She eases her mind by watching television shows on different climbing expeditions and educating herself about the sport.

Mountain climbing seems like the perfect sport for the fearless, who may also expect to encounter mountains lions, bears and rattlesnakes, as Perez has done in the past.

Too much for the non-fearless? Well, Perez does have a point.

"We work in the city all week and it is lovely to get out to the mountains," he says. A very good point indeed.