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Cathy's made it — to the top of the world!

At 06:30 on Saturday morning, Cathy O'Dowd phoned home. It was not, however, your average early-morning wake-up call for her mother, Mrs Patricia O'Dowd.

The telephone call was being broadcast live in Gauteng, on Radio 702, and its point of origin was the highest point on the planet, the summit of Mount Everest.

Cathy, a 27-year old Masters student and part-time lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, had just become the fifth woman to stand on top of the world. She is arguably the first South African to do so as well; one other has been there but he was not travelling on a South African passport at the time.

Exhausted and weary, but excited and happy, she told her mother and Radio 702's listeners, that she was overwhelmed by the beauty which surrounded her.

Cathy's success will be shared by all South Africans and it brings pride and pleasure to many who have been following the saga of the controversy-plagued expedition since it began over three months ago. The main sponsor withdrew after irreconcilable differences of opinion with the expedition's leader, Ian Woodall. Other sponsors endured, however, including Radio 702 itself and Apple Computers, by courtesy of whom *Rhodos* is able to publish the above



From left to right, Ian Woodall, Bruce Herrod, Cathy O'Dowd and a Sherpa, Ang Sirke, before setting out for Camp 4 and later the summit of Everest.

photograph, lifted from the World Wide Web.

After two earlier attempts on the summit, both thwarted by bad weather, Cathy, Ian and the expedition's photographer, Bruce Herrod, set out for the summit from Camp 4, where they had overnighted at 7 995 metres, very early on Saturday morning. They were accompanied by four Sherpas.

Woodall and a Sherpa reached the 8 848 metre high summit some 20 minutes before Cathy O'Dowd who had by then been trudging through deep snow for nearly ten hours. Bruce Herrod reached the summit much later and began his descent seven hours after Woodall and O'Dowd. This did not allow

him to reach the relative safety of Camp 4 in daylight and Ian Woodall attempted to 'talk him down' to Camp 4. By Sunday afternoon he had been officially listed as missing by the Nepalese government.

Someone who has been in contact with Cathy since she left, and who spent several weeks with the expedition in its early stages, is Monty Cooper, lecturer in Photojournalism at Rhodes. Since his return from the mountains over a month ago he has managed to keep in daily contact with the expedition and has been able to file copy for several publications as a result.

His Saturday morning was a busy one; newspapers, radio and television stations and

other media saw to it that his telephone did not stop ringing.

One telephone call was different, however. It was initiated by Cooper and had him talking to Sir Edmund Hillary in New Zealand. Hillary, the first man to climb Everest (on 29 May, 1953) was full of praise for Cathy. He is an expert on the region and the Himalayas and has been responsible for many social betterment projects in the area. He told Cooper that it "takes huge effort and self-discipline to conquer the mountain, even though more than 600 people have now done so."

"South Africa can and should be extremely proud of Cathy O'Dowd", this living legend told Cooper.

Mandela's message was spur to go on

Montgomery Cooper explores the background to the weekend's successful ascent of Mt Everest and reminds us that there are two sides to any story.

Greg Child, famous mountaineer, once wrote: "I had learned the real rule of this beautiful, reckless, terrible game, the only rule: The mountains are beautiful but they are not worth dying for."

The South African Everest team has been adopting that motto and avoiding injury and death through superb organisation and discipline, although 11 other teams have been nearly decimated in some of the worst storms seen on Mount Everest.

The much slandered team finally received the ultimate "stamp of approval" before its final summit attempt when President Mandela congratulated them on their courage and said that South Africa was completely behind them.

His words inspired Ian Woodall, from Camp Two on the slopes of Mount Everest, to say that this was the most important message they had yet received. Ian said modestly that "we have had a few problems along the way", playing down the controversy which has dogged their epic slog up the world's highest mountain.

The climbing season has been plagued with unseasonal weather and the tragic deaths of eight people from three international climbing teams.

The South African team has risen above the tragedy through Ian's conservative approach — pulling them down the mountain before the storms and assessing their ascent carefully.

The South Africans have demonstrated their determination and courage by avoiding the politics and media war back home, by being heroic and focused on the task at hand-to climb the

world's highest mountain without injury. They were the only ones that did not have to be rescued in the past two weeks from Camp Four.

The team displayed an enormous amount of heroism by helping with the rescue evacuation of 14 injured from the International Expedition, the American Group and

climbed, there were 12 expeditions on the Nepalese side and 14 on the Tibetan side this past month. More than 600 people have reached the top of Everest, while 100 have died in the attempt.

The South African team did split, as reported by the *Sunday Times* journalist Ken Vernon, largely due to the

as leader. But the remaining members, O'Dowd and Deysel, did not feel that this was appropriate as "we had no problems with Ian's leadership."

There was fierce in-fighting over the permit issue — the permit for Deshun Deysel and for Ken Woodall, Ian's father, but Cathy O'Dowd explained via satellite that there "was always one place on the permit reserved for the Woman on Everest project. Six women were selected out of 200 applicants to go to Kilimanjaro and two selected to go Base Camp. Only one name could go on the permit." Woodall had given O'Dowd's name.

I asked the team whether Woodall's style of leadership was a cause of the resignation of the three male climbers and the expedition doctor being sacked. Cathy said, "I frankly don't see the problem. Ian does lead in a military style. You need someone who is able to keep driving the project forward. I have yet to see him try to enforce a stupid or dangerous decision on the rest of the team." She considers him a safe and capable leader both on or off the mountain.

Woodall has talked proudly to me about his dream of investing in the future of mountaineering with this 'apprentice scheme' of the Woman on Everest contest. "No one expects everybody to top out (reach the summit) the first time and I don't expect myself to, but I think we've got a good chance. People misread it, even those three who went home. What I expected was that maybe in five or ten years, Cathy or Deshun, or both, would be leading the first South African all-woman Everest expedition!"

'Return my call' Mandela asks Cathy

One of the sponsors of the South African Everest Expedition, Radio 702, has a reporter stationed at the Base Camp on the mountain.

It was through Patrick Conroy's radio link to the summit, combined with a satellite telephone, that Cathy O'Dowd was able to speak to her mother and share her experience with the radio station's listenership.

Later, in alive crossing on the radio, President Mandela spoke to Conroy. He asked him to convey his congratulations to Woodall and O'Dowd saying that "our children did very well indeed".

The President said their success was "very important not only for the purpose of inspiring the youth but the whole country. They deserve the highest recognition we can give to people who make this achievement," he added.

Mr Mandela told Conroy he would like to speak to Woodall and O'Dowd personally on the telephone when they returned to Everest Base Camp.

Yugoslavians down from Camp Four to Two, past the Lhotse face.

Ian and Bruce Herrod, the deputy leader, have demonstrated their leadership and heroism at Camp Four. Ian went out into the snow and blizzard to rescue two lost climbers and bring them in their tents. Eight died in the blizzards.

Compared to the relatively "empty" mountain in 1953, when Hillary and Tensing

firing of the expedition doctor for a variety of reasons, and for the main reason of a major clash over leadership.

I was there in Namche Bazaar, when the team came off the mountain the first time, strained, bitter and split. I remember how shocked Cathy and I were at the news.

In a letter delivered to the remaining team members, the men indicated that they would only rejoin the expedition if Ian was removed