

Steps to victory



A 1,200-step stair climb, a 40-pound vest and a 60-pound 4-year-old

by Mike Knight

"Papa, will you carry me?" 4-year-old Alejandro Alava begged his father, Miguel.

What parent hasn't received such a plea, a heartstring-tugging request nearly impossible to refuse?

But there were plenty of reasons for Miguel to say no to his son. For starters, the two were standing on the second-story landing of Boston's iconic 200 Clarendon Tower, site of Climb to the Top Boston held in March 2017. The climb up 61 flights of stairs was created in 2009 to raise money for the National MS Society.



Boston’s iconic 200 Clarendon Tower, site of Climb to the Top Boston held in March 2017.

As Miguel and his son talked, other climbers barreled up the stairs to a steady drum of feet and cheering as they made their way to the top.

Alejandro had only announced his decision to climb the tower’s more than 1,200 steps to his mother, Wendy Alava, and his father in the chaotic moments just before the climb began. “I was registering, I had my bib, hat and vest on,” Miguel says. “And then Alejandro said, ‘I’m going with you, Papa.’”

“It was shocking,” Miguel recalls. “Our jaws dropped.” Stunned by the little boy’s declaration, Wendy and Miguel stood in the crowd with Alejandro. And then they cried.

After years of seemingly unrelated illnesses—eyelids that wouldn’t open, fatigue, foot drop and leg lock—Wendy was diagnosed with MS in 2010. Married in 2004, the couple live in Brooklyn, New York. Wendy, 38, teaches kindergarten. Miguel, 41, works as a personal trainer and CrossFit instructor.

A 40-pound disadvantage

Miguel had participated in two previous fundraising stair climbs before, both in New York City: the first for cystic fibrosis, the second for MS, which took place at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. But the couple had friends in Boston and wanted to get away for a weekend, so Miguel entered the Climb to the Top event.

To show his love and support for Wendy, Miguel had already chosen to wear a 40-pound

weighted vest for the climb that day. "I wanted to put myself at a disadvantage," he says. "I hear my wife go through pain all the time and I said, 'I'm going to put myself through this for her and overcome this and inspire people.' I wanted to put myself through a real challenge." Alejandro would add another 60 pounds to his father's load.

"I thought about it for a second and said, 'Why not'," Miguel recalls. And then he scooped up his son and started climbing again.

It was a decision he questioned almost immediately. "The first two or three flights, I thought I couldn't do it. And then Alejandro says, 'No Papa, you've got to do this, you've got to finish this.' And I said, 'OK, I'm going to finish this.'"

With Alejandro tapping the back of his head and imploring Miguel to climb faster, the pair made their way up the stairs. Some 18 minutes later, father and son reached the building's 61st floor, collapsing after climbing the last step.

Tough and tougher

In all, 700 participants representing 100 teams climbed the tower that day, according to Gena Hyde, the Society's associate vice president of communications. Kyle Terpak of the Biogen Climbers team finished first with a time of 07:54. Thirty-two of the climbers had MS. Fifteen fire departments from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire as well as the Boston area fielded teams for the event, with firefighters racing up the stairs in full "turnout gear," protective clothing and equipment that added an extra 60 to 70 pounds to their load.



Miguel carried his son, Alejandro, on his back while climbing 61 flights of stairs during the event.

Photo courtesy of the Alavas

The oldest climber was 74 years old, born on June 1, 1944. Alejandro was the climb's youngest entrant at just under 5 years old. The climb raised \$250,000 to support the Society in its quest to find a cure for MS and put an end to the disease that has changed Wendy's life, along with Miguel and Alejandro's, forever.

"When she got diagnosed, it was the most painful thing that ever happened to me," Miguel says. Before she was diagnosed, the couple knew a friend with MS, as well as a former client of Miguel's. So the Alavas had seen firsthand how challenging MS can be, but suddenly it became far more real. "It hit me close to home," Miguel says. Now Miguel calls Wendy his hero. "I'm a tough guy, but she's really tough," he says.

Miguel wants to get even more involved. Having participated in marathons, climbs and "Spartan races"—grueling runs through obstacle courses filled with barbed wire, large ropes and climbing walls—he just completed the Society's MuckFest® MS mud runs this June in New Jersey. "She's against the mud run because she doesn't want mud in the house," he says, laughing. "I say, 'No, the mud is for MS,' and she's OK with that."

Miguel is planning on repeating the climb in 2018, this time in New York. "[The climb] was the most powerful thing I've ever done," he says. "When Alejandro came and did the climb, she'll never forget that," Miguel says.

Wendy also remembers the other people who were part of it. "When I saw so many people going through the same thing, it made me understand that we are all going through this differently and going through different stages with our own personal battles," she says. "Knowing that for one day, everyone was there together, there was so much love and support—that helped a lot."

The commitment her husband and son showed was especially important. "It was very exciting to see Miguel and Alejandro. They made it from the bottom all the way to the top," she says. "My husband is not a quitter. He proved to me that day he didn't give up. My son also proved it that he didn't give up either. And for me, it helped knowing that."

Mike Knight is a freelance writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in December 2013.

Learn more about MS Society Climb to the Top events in [New York City](#) and [Boston](#).