



Team Selection for the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition

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Introduction

My fellowship involved travel to 7 different Commonwealth countries to select team members for the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition due to take place during the 2009 / 2010 Antarctic season. The aim of the Fellowship was to use national media in each country to encourage applications from women to take part in the expedition, particularly those who may not have any previous expedition experience but still feel a desire for adventure; and to arrange face-to-face interviews with potential candidates.

The Fellowship was also an opportunity for me to experience the culture of each country and to gain a greater understanding of national attitudes; knowledge which will be invaluable when it comes to leading the expedition and to the task of turning 8 strangers (from very diverse backgrounds) into a single, well-bonded team.

The Fellowship took place between mid-August and late October 2008, and involved travel to the Commonwealth countries of Cyprus, Ghana, India, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, New Zealand and Jamaica.

The Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition

In December 2009, two teams of 4 women from across the Commonwealth will set off from opposite coasts of Antarctica to ski to the South Pole. They will travel some 500 miles across the most hostile environment on Earth; where temperatures fall to -30C, winds reach speeds of over 80mph, crevasses lurk beneath the ice and disorientating blizzards last for days at a time.

The women will be pulling sledges containing all the food, fuel and equipment they will need for their journey. Camping in tents on the ice when they sleep, they will survive on lightweight dehydrated rations and melted snow. Unguided, they will need to rely on each other to navigate themselves safely to the bottom of the World.

Along the way, the teams will experience a wilderness that few have had the privilege to see; endless white horizons of ancient snow and ice, big skies where the sun never sets, distant shimmering mountains untouched by man and a silence more complete than any other.

Skiing to the South Pole has become a journey that is a symbol of personal endeavour and achievement. By creating a team from diverse countries and cultures across the Commonwealth, the expedition has the ability to demonstrate the potential of greater inter-cultural understanding and exchange, while at the same time, highlighting the core values that we all have in common.

When the teams meet each other at the South Pole around New Year's Day 2010, the team members from Cyprus, Ghana, Brunei Darussalam and Jamaica, will be the first representative of their nation (male or female) to ski to the South Pole, while the team members from India, Singapore and New Zealand will be the first women of their nation to ski to the South Pole.

Fantastic as these achievements will be, the expedition is about much more than national records. It is hoped that all the women taking part will act as role models on their return, undertaking a programme of lectures and school talks to inspire others in their home-countries – particularly women - to strive to make their ambitions a reality, whatever the challenges they may face.

Furthermore, by relating their experiences the women will establish an interest in Antarctica in regions of the World where the relevance of the 7th continent and its fate is not immediately obvious. By emphasizing the link between Antarctica and regional climate, they will add to the rising consciousness of the need to protect this unique environment.

The year the expedition takes place, 2009, is the 60th anniversary year of the Modern Commonwealth. The expedition is well-timed to demonstrate the fabulous richness of the Commonwealth nations as well as to raise awareness of the work and value of the Modern Commonwealth as a 21st Century organisation.

Felicity Aston

I am an expedition leader who has been lucky enough over the last 10 years to be part of expeditions to many of the coldest regions of the World including the Canadian Arctic, Greenland, Iceland, Scandinavia and Siberia. In 2006 I trained and led a group of 4 women across the Greenland ice-sheet and we became the first British women's team to successfully make the crossing.

Through these experiences I have learned a lot about leadership and teamwork, as well as goal-setting and achieving ambitions - lessons which I now pass on to others through workshops and presentations.

My fascination and passion for Antarctica stems from three years spent living and working at a Research Station on the Antarctic Peninsula as part of the British Antarctic Survey.

Team Selection

The success or failure of the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition, in both its physical and wider aims, rests entirely on the determination and aptitude of the team members. Therefore, the team must consist of women who are not only capable of skiing to the South Pole and working as part of a group but who are also prepared to commit time and energy to motivating others and sharing their experiences.

As a whole, it is important that the team reflect the multi-cultural, multi-faith nature of the Commonwealth in order to demonstrate the potential of global co-operation. It was also imperative to open the opportunity to join the expedition to all women, regardless of age, occupation and expedition experience so that the team can inspire women of all backgrounds to tackle their ambitions, no matter how daunting the obstacles. To this end, I wasn't looking for an entire team of elite athletes, experienced mountaineers or accomplished explorers but for women with an enthusiasm for the wider aims of the expedition, with the determination to succeed and with the potential to inspire others. A desire for adventure, indefatigable tolerance and a good sense of humour were also high on the list of qualities needed.

There were, additionally, some more practical criteria. In order for the team to be able to communicate, members needed good written and spoken English* and to have regular internet access. For the outreach commitment, team members also needed to be resident in the country they were representing before, during and after the expedition.

* The English requirement was not as restrictive as it might seem, as English is a first or official language in most Commonwealth countries.

Applications

Applications to join the team were initially invited via an online application form on the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition website. As well as asking for details of internet access and contact information, the form asked 5 questions:

- Explain why you want to be involved in the expedition.
- Outline your outdoor / sport / adventurous activity experience, if any.
- What additional skills will you bring to the team?
- How would you describe yourself?
- Is there anything that you would like to add to your application?

The questions were deliberately open to allow applicants the opportunity to show individuality in their answers and applicants were not asked for their age (although many included this information).

I personally read every single application form submitted but also enlisted the help of several trusted friends and experienced expeditioners in making an assessment of the applications and compiling a short -list of 10 candidates for each country.

Assessing the applications was extremely hard due to the large number of extremely worthy candidates but I found being able to compare my impressions of a candidate with others made the task less agonising. I have included a selection of extracts from the applications in Appendix A. The enthusiasm and support for the expedition expressed in many of the applications was, and continues to be, a great source of motivation.

Interviews

In each country I arranged a day on which to interview, individually, all 10 candidates short-listed from the online applications. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes and was kept as informal as possible. Usually I conducted the interview alone, except in India where I had the valuable company of Commander Satyabrata Dam who has led Indian Navy Expeditions to Mount Everest as well as to both the North and South Poles.

During the interview I tried to establish a number of things about the candidate including:

- Was the candidate someone I could imagine living with in a tent for 6 weeks?
- Were they capable mentally and physically (given the fitness training planned) of successfully completing the expedition?
- Were they prepared to contribute fully and enthusiastically to the work in preparation for the expedition and towards the outreach programmes on return from the Antarctic?
- Was the candidate a suitable role model with whom other women could identify?
- Would the candidate be adding other valuable skills to the team?

It was extremely important to be able to meet each of the prospective team members in person as it was very rarely the strongest candidates on paper that were eventually selected. After the interviews, two women from each country were asked to take part in the next phase of the selection which will take place in Scandinavia in the spring of 2009. Brief biographies of all selected candidates can be found in Appendix D.

Logistics and Planning

Before departure there were a number of things that had to be put in place to ensure that the maximum possible benefit would come from my time overseas.

- **Website and online application form**

My first priority on hearing that I had been awarded a Fellowship was to create a website so that potential team members could start applying as soon as possible. I contacted a web expert who created a simple website from a Wordpress blog using the address www.commonwealthexpedition.com. I used the site to record my progress throughout the course of my journey and have been receiving an average of 1000 hits a day. The website hosted an online application form, as detailed above, and contained information about the expedition and eligibility criteria for potential candidates.
- **Publicity in National Media**

In order to ensure that as many women as possible heard about the opportunity to join the expedition team, it was important to attract media interest in each of the participating countries, including the UK. I spent a lot of time researching the major press, radio and TV media in each country, sending out press releases by email to journalists, news agencies and newsdesks. The response from the media varied in each country but as a result of the press releases I was contacted by a number of journalists to give interviews by email or over the telephone. I gave several live radio interviews to various radio stations over the phone (which often took place in the middle of the night due to the difference in time zones!). I kept detailed records of the journalists I had spoken to and their contact details so that I could send further press releases to keep them updated as the team selection progressed. A selection of Press Cuttings and summary of media coverage is included in Appendix B.
- **Arranging interview venues**

In each country I needed a venue in which to hold the interviews with potential team members. I approached the British Council which has offices in over 110 countries across the globe and which works to promote all forms of British culture. British Council offices in Accra, Ghana; New Delhi, India; Tampines, Singapore; and New Kingston, Jamaica all generously allowed me to use their premises as an interview venue. Unfortunately this was not possible in Cyprus, New Zealand and Brunei so alternative arrangements had to be made. In Cyprus I contacted the University of Cyprus who kindly permitted me to use a conference room on the University Campus on the outskirts of Nicosia. In Brunei, I was charitably hosted by the CfBT Educational Trust in Bandar Seri Begawan, while in New Zealand I contacted the historic conference venue, Turnbull House, right in the centre of Wellington, which allowed me to hire a room at a reduced (and very reasonable) rate.
- **Establishing contacts within each country**

In-country contacts came from a wide range of sources including friends, colleagues, Churchill Fellows, uk-based interest groups, British High Commissions in each country and through research on the internet. I wrote to a number of individuals and organisations

including politicians, well-known mountaineers or adventurers, sports clubs, Antarctic societies, youth projects and universities. This resulted in a number of meetings scheduled during my forthcoming visit to the country and helped to spread news of the opportunity to join the expedition.

- Meetings with National representatives in the UK

As well as asking for advice from friends, contacts and Churchill Fellows who had worked, travelled or lived in any of the countries I was intending to travel to, I also arranged to meet with representatives of each country stationed within the UK. I had successful meetings with the High Commissioner of Jamaica, H.E. Mr Burchell Whiteman; First Secretary at the High Commission of Singapore, Ms Valerie Chua; Commonwealth Minister at the High Commission of India, Mr Madhava Chandra; and a telephone conversation with the Acting High Commissioner of Cyprus, Mr Dimitris Hatzirygiou. In each case I was offered help with the dissemination of press releases through the High Commission Press Office, useful in-country contacts and lots of positive encouragement.

The Journey

I spent roughly a week in each of the 7 countries, during which time I organised media interviews and coverage, met with in-country contacts, conducted interviews with potential team members and then met up with the selected candidates to discuss the expedition in more detail. I also set some time aside to see something of the country, if I could, and was often invited to give talks about Antarctica or about previous expeditions to interested groups.

It was cost-effective to fly on a single round-the-world multi-stop flight, so the order in which I visited the countries was determined by the ticket (as was the length of time I spent in each country to some extent). A full itinerary is included in Appendix C.

Cyprus

The Republic of Cyprus is one of only 3 Commonwealth countries in Europe. It is also home to one of Europe's longest standing territorial disputes. The northern half of the island of Cyprus has been occupied by Turkey since a military invasion in 1974, leaving Nicosia as the only divided capital in Europe. The 'Green Line', a UN patrolled buffer zone, splits the city in half, leaving a no-mans-land of rubble and barbed wire to run right through its centre. The situation dominates the social and political consciousness of Cyprus as a nation, remaining a bitter and painful topic for many.

During my visit to Cyprus I stayed in budget accommodation close to the walled part of old Nicosia. Media coverage of the applications, although slow to start with, had been reasonable and as a result I had received just under 80 applications from Cypriot women wanting to join the expedition. The interviews were held on the University of Cyprus campus on the outskirts of Nicosia. I met and interviewed 8 women (2 other candidates who had been invited failed to show) including a ski champion hoping to represent Cyprus in the Winter Olympics 2010, the leader of a volunteer group working to clean the sea beds around the island, a member of the Cyprus State Youth Orchestra and the logistics manager of the Cyprus World Rally Championships. What really struck me about all the candidates was the deep passion they felt for their country and for personally effecting change.

The two selected candidates were Stephanie Solomonides, a 25-year-old IT Implementation Officer from Nicosia and Athina Rokopou, a 28-year-old Telecommunications Technology Consultant from Larnaca District. (More detailed biographies can be found in Appendix D).

During my stay in Cyprus I had a meeting with the Press and Information Officers at the British High Commission in Nicosia who were pleased to help not only with the future publicity of the expedition but also to act as a support to the Cypriot team members and to potentially play a role in any post-expedition outreach activities. I also met with the Multilateral Relations Attaché at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which ultimately resulted in the expedition receiving a letter of support from the President of Cyprus, Mr Demetris Christofias.

Ghana

Ghana was the first African nation to join the Commonwealth and has been a member since Independence in 1957. Free of the tribalism that has blighted many nations in the troubled West African region, Ghana has often been celebrated for its stable, democratic politics and for the freedom of its press. My stay in Ghana coincided with the Accra Climate Change Talks (the latest round of talks to create an international deal under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) being held in the city's conference centre. As a result, considerable attention within the country was focussed on the effect changing and unpredictable climate would have on Ghana and on Africa as a whole.

Attracting media attention and applications in Ghana was difficult as the idea of skiing and polar travel was a completely new and foreign concept to most people. Therefore, my first task on arriving in Accra was to visit several radio stations and newspaper offices to explain through the media what the expedition was about. I eventually received over 30 applications from women in Ghana and met 6 candidates (4 other candidates failed to show) during a day of interviews held at the British Council in Accra. The candidates included a journalist, an NGO (non-governmental organisation) volunteer, a civil servant and a hotel chef. All the candidates shared an obvious pride in the achievements of their country as well as a genuine excitement about its future and a desire to persuade more Ghanaians to put something back into the nation.

The two selected women are Barbara Erefua Yanney, a 29-year-old freelance writer from Accra and Sheillah Boachie-Danquah, a 24-year-old Biochemistry graduate currently spending a year of national service working on a hydro-electric dam project. (More detailed biographies can be found in Appendix D).

I was fortunate to have the time to leave the capital, Accra, for a couple of days and travel west along the coast to the town of Elmina. There, I was met by Tom Malcolm-Green of the Sabre Charitable Trust, a British NGO working in Ghana. He was able to show me some of the Trust's past and current projects in the villages around Elmina as well as passing on lots of background information about the country in general. Returning to Accra I had helpful meetings with the Press and Public Affairs Secretary at the British High Commission and with the Communications Manager at the British Council. Both were keen to help with any post-expedition activities in Ghana and to support the Ghanaian expedition member in any way they could.

India

India was instrumental in the formation of the Modern Commonwealth in 1949 and remains one of its key members. In 2010 India will host the XIX Commonwealth Games in New Delhi creating renewed support for all forms of sport and outdoor activity in the country. India has had a strong and accomplished mountaineering community, of both male and female climbers and skiers, for many years (a community which is particularly thriving in New Delhi) and has maintained a permanent scientific station in Antarctica since 1983.

Due to India's long history of involvement in adventurous expeditions and Antarctic science, it was not surprising that there was a great deal of interest in the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition. The Director of the government funded National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR), which operates India's scientific activities in Antarctica, expressed his support for the expedition and several members of staff from NCAOR were among the applicants wanting to join the expedition team. The Indian Mountaineering Federation (IMF) also distributed information about the application to its members. As a result I received more than 130 applications from women in India, many of whom had considerable expedition and cold-weather experience.

Assisted by Polar veteran, Commander Satyabrata Dam, I interviewed 8 candidates (2 other invited candidates failed to show) during a day at the British Council in New Delhi. The candidates included Everest mountaineers, a marketing executive, a doctor working with orphans suffering from HIV/AIDS, a teacher working to protect the endangered Pangolin and an outdoor instructor promoting sport to girls. They were a truly inspiring group of women, which made the selection extremely difficult.

Eventually, we decided to invite Aparna Ray, a 27-year-old lawyer from Mumbai, and Reena Dharmshaktu, a 38-year-old mountaineer and outdoor instructor from Darjeeling, to join the next selection phase. (More detailed biographies can be found in Appendix D).

The names of the selected women were announced at an evening organised by the British Council during which I was invited to give an account of my previous expeditions to an audience of 150 people. After the event I was able to talk to numerous journalists which provided the project with some fantastic coverage in the press. The British Council in New Delhi are extremely supportive of the project and are keen to be involved in any post-expedition events. I also met with the British High Commissioner in New Delhi who was very generous with advice and suggestions about where to seek further support in India.

Singapore

Singapore is the only city-state within the Commonwealth and one of the wealthiest members. It is a fascinating place, both politically and socially, that places a great emphasis on motivating young people and where the preservation of environment and natural resources is becoming an ever more prevalent concern. Despite lacking mountains, snow or large areas of wilderness, Singapore has a significant community of adventurers and explorers and participation in outdoor courses and activities run by Outward Bound is compulsory in schools.

The main Singapore media houses were enthusiastic about the expedition from the start so the opportunity to join the expedition team was well publicised. I received 80 applications from women

in Singapore and nearly every form mentioned an impressive level of sport and activity that was obviously considered by the women themselves to be normal or below average. This left me with the impression that Singaporeans in general are a very fit and active nation. The interviews took place at the British Council Tampines Centre and I met 10 candidates including an Officer in the Singapore Defence Force, a hearing impaired lawyer, former members of the Singapore Women's Everest Team, an outdoor instructor and a journalist.

The selected women were Sophia Pang, a 36-year-old aerobics instructor and mother of three, and Lina Goh, also 36, a Senior Engineer at the National University of Singapore working in the field of Sustainable Development. (More detailed biographies can be found in Appendix D).

I was very fortunate to have the enthusiastic support of the British Council during my stay in Singapore. They arranged for me to give a series of talks and to join several discussions about Antarctica, climate change and sustainability. These included a presentation to 360 youths of the National Youth Achievement Award Council, a talk and discussion panel with 50 students and staff at the National University of Singapore, a presentation to 40 students as part of the Junior Science Cafe programme at the Singapore Science Centre and 50 members of the public during an evening event at the Singapore Science Centre. I also gave a talk about a previous expedition to the Singapore branch of the Royal Geographical Society.

Through the British Council I was able to meet the Singapore Women's Everest Team; David Lim, leader of the First Singapore Everest Expedition; and several inspirational youth leaders. Contacts which will no doubt prove to be useful in the future. I also attended a meeting with the British High Commissioner in Singapore who promised his continued support for both the Singaporean team members and any post-expedition activities.

Brunei Darussalam

Since independence in 1984, the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam has been governed as an absolute monarchy without any elected legislative assembly, making it almost unique* within the Commonwealth. Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, the latest Sultan of a dynasty stretching back to the 15th Century, is both head of state and head of government. Brunei is a very small country – it took just a couple of hours to drive from one end to the other – with a population of just 400,000 people.

Located on the island of Borneo, Brunei is surrounded by some of the richest ecology in the World and yet adventure sports and exploration is a relatively new concept in the country. Despite this, news of the opportunity to be part of the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition was warmly received and I was delighted that nearly 50 women from Brunei submitted an application.

The interviews took place at the offices of the CfBT Educational Trust, a UK-based educational charity, located in a suburb of Bandar Seri Begawan. I met 8 candidates (2 other invited candidates did not show) which included a Midwife who took time out between delivering babies to come and see me, and a lady who had just been awarded the title 'First Female Explorer of Brunei' for her travels across Africa in a Landrover.

The selected candidates are Dk Najibah Eradah binti P. A. M. Al-Sufri Pg M-L Kahar (or Era for short), a 25-year-old Diplomatic Officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Aniza Ishak, a 19-year-old air hostess from Bandar Seri Begawan. (Detailed biographies can be found in Appendix D).

In Bandar Seri Begawan I met with the British High Commissioner for Brunei who was extremely helpful both before and during my visit by enabling the Press Officer at the High Commission to help me distribute Press Releases and by providing several key contacts as well as lots of useful background information about the country. I am exceptionally grateful to H.E. Mr John Saville for his enthusiastic support. It was through Mr Saville that I was able to meet with Datin Masni Ali, a well-known campaigner in Brunei, who was very generous with both her time and advice.

*The King of Swaziland and the King of Tonga are also, arguably, supreme rulers.

New Zealand

New Zealand has a special connection with Antarctica. Not only is it a relative neighbour of the white continent but the city of Christchurch in the South Island acts as a gateway to the ice. Planes bound for Antarctica set off from Christchurch airport throughout the night and the surrounding warehouses house the Antarctic programmes of America and Italy as well that of New Zealand. The involvement of national hero, Sir Edmund Hillary, in the historic crossing of Antarctica by tractor in 1957, served to reinforce the continent's place in the national psyche.

Therefore, it was a big surprise to many, as it was initially to me, that there has yet to be a New Zealand woman ski to the South Pole. What was not surprising was the number of women who were determined, and eminently qualified in terms of experience, to fill that role. I received more than 200 applications from women in New Zealand despite only a few appearances in the national media. It was almost more applications than I could deal with as it took a great deal of time to read through each application.

I interviewed 12 applicants over the course of a day in Wellington. Almost all of the applicants had an impressive degree of outdoor experience ranging from skiing and mountaineering to kayaking and tramping. After a great deal of consideration the chosen candidates were Charmaine Tate, a 33-year-old Doctor from Auckland, currently serving in the New Zealand Army and Melanie Money, a 33-year old nurse and former ski-patroller from Wellington.

While in the capital, I visited the New Zealand branch of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and met with the British High Commissioner to New Zealand who gave me several suggestions on where to seek support in the country. Leaving Wellington, I travelled to Christchurch in time to enjoy the Christchurch Antarctic Festival, now in its third year. As part of the Festival I was able to see an archive film of Sir Edmund Hillary's journey to the South Pole by tractor in 1957, learn about the science work undertaken on New Zealand's Scott Base and New Zealand's support of the Antarctic Heritage Trust working to preserve the historic huts of Scott and Shackleton. I also had time to visit the International Antarctic Centre, a tourist attraction educating the public about Antarctica.

Jamaica

The Caribbean island of Jamaica has a strong sporting heritage (as demonstrated by the domination of Jamaican sprinters at the 2008 Beijing Olympics) but very little background in adventure sports. However, the idea of a Jamaican skiing to the South Pole is not completely without precedent. Jamaica, famously, has an Olympic bobsleigh team. It also has a dogsled team which has successfully completed the Iditarod and a National Ski Federation which was created to support a Canadian-born snowboarder and a freestyle skier who both wish to represent Jamaica in the Winter Olympics.

Despite this, I was unable to generate much media interest until I arrived in Jamaica the week before the interviews were due to take place. Even so, by the end of the week I had received nearly 30 applications from Jamaican women. None of the applicants had any expedition experience but this did not dim their determination to be the one to ski to the South Pole. The most common motivation among the candidates was the opportunity to show the World what Jamaican women can do. I interviewed 7 women (3 other candidates were unable to attend at the last minute) at the British Council in New Kingston and admired all of them for their passion and resolve.

The selected candidates are Kim-Marie Spence, a 30-year-old member and strategist of a regional think tank from Kingston, and Alecia Maragh, a 21-year-old Political Science and International Relations graduate from Spanish Town. (More detailed biographies in Appendix D).

While in Kingston I met with the British Deputy High Commissioner who was extremely helpful at providing some background on social and political issues within Jamaica as well as suggestion several sources of possible support within Jamaica. I was also fortunate to be able to travel into the Blue Mountains just outside Kingston and trek to 'The Peak', the highest point on the island, and the most popular outdoor ambition for most Jamaicans.

Problems and Difficulties

- **Acknowledgement of applications**
After the launch of the website it soon became clear that one serious mistake in the design of the online application form was the lack of any automatic acknowledgement on the submission of an application. As a result of this omission applicants were left unsure if their form had been received, while I had to cope with numerous multiple applications and literally dozens of emails enquiring whether forms had been safely received.
- **Nationality**
The issue of nationality was an unforeseen complication which quickly became a major issue. Initial eligibility requirements asked only that applicants were permanent residents of the country they wished to represent and that they would be living in that country for a reasonable period both before and after the expedition so that they were able to carry out the planned outreach programmes. However, during the course of my Fellowship, I realised that in order to win public approval and support, team members would not only need to be full citizens, by birth, of the country they wished to represent but that they should also have been resident in that country for the greater part of their lives.
This amendment of the eligibility criteria caused much disappointment for many applicants as well as prompting numerous discussions about differing ideas on nationality. Ultimately, candidates who were part of a nation's Diaspora, or who had been living in a country for many years but were born elsewhere, or who had lived overseas for many years, ended up feeling left out.
- **Media**
In some countries, notably Ghana and Jamaica, it was difficult to generate media interest before arriving in the country. Therefore, the website and applications in these countries received virtually no media coverage until I arrived in the country a few days before the

application deadline. Additionally, in some countries I had no success generating media interest by sending press releases through email. In these cases it was only when I spoke to journalists and newsdesks on the telephone that I started getting a positive response.

- Ramadan

My visit to India, Singapore and Brunei coincided with Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, during which Muslims do not eat or drink between sunrise and sunset. This was most significant in Brunei where the vast majority of the population are practising Muslims. Practically, it meant that shops and offices throughout Brunei closed early and that business of any form was kept to a minimum.

Outcome

It is intended that the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition will be funded through commercial sponsorship. However, I could not begin approaching companies for support until I had an expedition team in place. This left me with a 'Catch 22' situation. I could not visit each country to select team members without financial support and I couldn't find financial support without a team.

With the support of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust I was able to make the first step in turning the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition from fantasy into reality. I now have a team of 16 women from 8 different Commonwealth countries all working to gather support for the project and am in a much stronger position to be able to approach commercial organisations for support and sponsorship.

In addition the Fellowship has generated a great deal of support for the expedition in each country, both in terms of media interest and a following of people who are keen to track the progress of the expedition and its participants. I have returned with a substantial list of promising contacts within each country which I will be making use of in the coming months.

Finally, the Fellowship has enabled me to gather a much greater understanding and appreciation of the different cultures involved in the expedition. I have a clearer idea of where the team members are coming from and for this reason, can better foresee the problems they may face when it comes to the training in Scandinavia and the expedition in Antarctica.

Therefore, all the initial aims and objectives of my Fellowship have been successfully reached and I am now concentrating on the next step in the selection procedure. At the end of February 2009, all 16 women will travel to Scandinavia for a week long training camp which will culminate in a 3-day mini expedition under winter conditions. This will enable the participants to be sure they are prepared to take on the challenge of the Antarctic and also for me to see how the candidates work together as a team. At the end of the week, the squad of 16 women will be reduced to the final team of 8 (plus one reserve).

My Fellowship journey may be over but as the expedition develops and progresses, I will not forget that it was the Trust that enabled the original seed to be planted.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

The biggest thanks has to go to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for believing in me and my ability to achieve the objectives of my Fellowship. In particular I would like to thank Judith Barber and Julia Weston for all their help both before and after my journey.

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In Singapore:

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Appendices

Appendix A : Extracts from Application Forms

The extracts reproduced here have all been taken from application forms submitted through the expedition website. The views expressed are those of the applicants and do not necessarily reflect those of myself or of the expedition as a whole.

Explain why you want to be involved in the expedition:

To make a difference.

As a teacher, my personal drive and motivation is that all children are capable of achieving; academic or non-academic. Throughout my teaching I try to help each child develop the ability to believe in themselves. Often though, they are challenged by the stereotypical images that society places on them. Being part of an expedition (with a joint aim) involving people from different backgrounds will send out a positive message not just to children, but adults as well. I want to be involved in an expedition that shows - it doesn't matter who you are, we all have different qualities to share with others.

[From the UK]

A wise person once said - "To get something you never had, you have to do something you never did." Antarctic, this must be the ultimate test of courage, facing fear, resilience and maybe even trust for a Caribbean mother of three. I wake sun-kissed on the darkest day, surrounded by a dozen family members and even more friends within 'shouting distance'. Antarctica is truly a world away but I need it to have truly lived in all of Nature's vibrancy. The expedition is a chance to encourage other women to do more and move beyond one's fear, but also to see the other side of NATURE – to see the beauty in that which we otherwise dread. As a Caribbean team member of this expedition, my experience would be the strongest testimony to women out there, that the unthinkable in their lives can be done.

[From Jamaica]

It's 11.30 on a Sunday morning. I've picked up the local paper & I'm having a slow start to the day. I come across an article about an all-women trek across Antarctica and I feel my chest expand. Yes. This is it. I know with absolute certainty that this is what I want. I jump on the computer & flick through the website knowing I would eventually come to this question. So many reasons crowd through my mind. From my earliest memories of walking the arid hills of Cyprus with my grandfather, to the sea voyage as a 5 year old journeying to New Zealand. To a passionate life in the theatre mixed with travel, adventure, beauty, art & people. Musings on the ideas of immigration and displacement, & the personal vs. the social. A sense of love and duty that brought me back to Cyprus & the realisation that life's journey is not a linear path but one that loops back on itself, yet keeps moving forward nonetheless. I want to be involved as every fibre of my being feels it. This is who I am

[From Cyprus]

I am a khasi tribal female (belonging to a matrilineal society) from the beautiful and enchanting Hill city of Shillong (also known as the Scotland of the East), in the state of Meghalaya, (In North East India, bordering Bangladesh) who loves extracurricular and outdoors activities, and I am genuinely thrill of adventures. Even though hailing from the remote and corner most part of North East India, which is mostly effected by insurgency related problems, and mainly regarded by mainland India as backward, I would love to prove to the world that the majority of people living in our state are friendly, peaceful, fun loving ,God fearing and decent human beings.

[From India]

I am fully aware and support the profound opportunities and benefits to our respective as well as collective communities to prove that determination, love and collaboration surpasses boundaries and makes the difference between success and failure. We are not alone; Communication, language, cultural differences can bridge the gap!

[From Brunei]

The fact that this is an all-women's expedition has special significance for me. It would be exciting to work and- hopefully- bond with women from so many different countries. Growing up in small towns and cities and as lawyer working in women's rights, I have seen how women do not have the space to dream of being explorers or travellers or are denied the luxury of just travelling their own chosen paths. It would be very fulfilling to be a part of an expedition that can- in its own way-make a difference to how women see themselves.

[From India]

I am thrilled to be getting the opportunity to apply for such event.

[From Jamaica]

It would be a privilege to spend time with other women, to learn and understand about the differences in our cultures, as well as sharing the similarities that bind us together. The emerging role of women in 21st century society is fascinating; we are on the brink of a whole world of choice and opportunity limited only by our own fear to believe it.

[From the UK]

I just had twin girls and making it to the expedition and successfully completing it would be a good role model and something that they can be proud of when they grow up

[From Cyprus]

We are DIFFERENT PEOPLE of DIFFERENT CULTURE but after all we are ONE ROOT OF THE SAME TREE AND ARE RESPONSIBLE TO SAVE OUR EARTH & ITS HABITANTS.

[From India]

To be selected would be an honour as I would pride myself in representing my country and motivating other Jamaicans to put something back into Jamaica to continue its progress towards a promising future.

[From Jamaica]

I would like to represent the older woman. Life does not stop after the age of 40. Lots of women are capable of a lot more than they settle for. They set themselves limitations and don't feel they have the capabilities. We are all able to achieve personal and physical challenges if motivated in the right way. I would love the opportunity to be a role model to other women as well as achieving the personal and physical challenges that an expedition such as this one would bring. I would have the opportunity to reach out to women of all ages and show them just what anyone of them are capable of doing given the chance. If I can do it, why can't they?

[From the UK]

This mission will act as a reminder to all parents to be equally proud of their daughters.

[From India]

I know that I am not an athlete and I have never lived or walked for several days in the South Pole, or climbed the highest mountain in this planet. All I know is that I would like very much to experience such a great adventure, the thrill of being a part of a team walking in Antarctica. They say that the

Antarctic is one of the most beautiful continents of the planet. I would like to have the chance to be there supporting the rights of the women all around the world.

[From

Cyprus]

Appendix B : Press Cuttings and Summary of Media Coverage

Summary of Media Coverage:

Cyprus	Ghana	India	Singapore
Cyprus Mail	Ghanaian Times	Telegraph	Today
Cyprus Now	Daily Graphic	Metro Now	Straits Times
Cyprus Weekly	Ghanaian Chronicle	Mail Today	My Paper
Grapevine	Atlantis Radio	Sakaal Times	Channel News Asia (TV)
Sigma TV	Joy FM (Radio)	BIG FM (Radio)	938LIVE (Radio)
CyBC TV	Ghana Web (web)		
CyBC 2 (Radio)			

Brunei Darussalam	New Zealand	Jamaica	UK
Borneo Bulletin	Tourism NZ (web)	Sunday Herald	The Voice
The Brunei Times		Jamaica Observer	TGO magazine
Brunei Lifestyle (web)		Irie FM	Trail magazine
Brudirect.com (web)		Power 106 (Radio)	
		JIS (web)	

Selected Press Cuttings:

Why swelter in Cyprus when you can freeze in Antarctica?

Sunday, September 7, 2008

Cyprus Mail

Two brave women are hoping to experience the freezing wastes of Antarctica
 WHY WOULD anyone want to travel 500 miles across the most hostile environment on Earth? Where temperatures fall to -30C, winds reach speeds of over 129 kilometres per hour, crevasses lurk beneath the ice and disorientating blizzards last for days at a time? What sort of person pulls a sledge containing food, fuel and equipment for exactly such a journey? If camping in Polis Chrysochous is your idea of slumming it, how does camping in tents on the ice, surviving on lightweight dehydrated rations and melted snow, sound?

To Athina Rokopou, 28, and Stephanie Solomonides, 25, an experience like that sounds simply amazing. For them the thought of crossing a wilderness that few have had the privilege to see is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that they hope they will be blessed to live through. Endless white horizons of ancient snow and ice, big skies where the sun never sets, distant shimmering mountains untouched by man and a silence more complete than any other is something most people only hear about.

But for Athina and Stephanie it could soon become a reality as the duo have been short-listed from over 80 applications in Cyprus to join the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition. The two women will fly to Scandinavia next spring to attend the final team selection event.

In December 2009, two teams of four women selected from Cyprus, Ghana, India, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, New Zealand and Jamaica will set off from opposite coasts of Antarctica to ski to the South Pole. Unguided, they will need to rely on each other to navigate themselves safely to their destination.

The teams will meet each other at the South Pole around New Year's Day 2010 - the year the Commonwealth Games will be held in New Delhi, India.

"It sounds amazing. A desert of white, just ploughing through it," said Stephanie, an IT Implementation Officer from Nicosia.

Surprisingly, neither woman gave the expedition much thought before applying. Athina said she just happened to be watching the news the night before the deadline when she heard about it.

"I thought to myself, 'I want to go there too'. I actually said it aloud," the Telecommunications Technology Consultant from Athienou in the Larnaca district said. But instead of going on online to apply immediately, she went out with friends. As she drove home the thought came into her head again and she decided to fill in the on-line application.

"It was a lifetime opportunity I wanted to experience," she said.

Stephanie's story was not dissimilar. In her case she'd received an email from a friend with a link to the expedition's website 30 minutes before the deadline and a note questioning who'd be insane enough to do something like that.

Neither woman really talked about what they'd just done until they were shortlisted and got their interviews with British Polar traveller, Felicity Aston, who will lead the expedition. Hours after that first interview both were told they had made it through to the final round. The duo emanate positive energy and enthusiasm. Just sitting in their presence, their excitement and dynamism is infectious. Although they are very different in many ways, they both share an unbending resolve to succeed. Looking at them you'd never think suspect that they are planning to train for what will likely be one of the hardest physical, mental and emotional challenges of their life.

Stephanie said although this was a journey of personal discovery that would challenge her to the very core, the expedition itself was much more than selfish insight.

"I think a major part of the experience is to be able to bond with seven other women who speak different languages and who are from different religious backgrounds. There is a lot to be learned from them and those experiences can be brought back here. It is a unique experience... It should be incredible. It should be amazing."

"If I prepare psychologically, I can handle it," Athina said.

Stephanie believes her sheer determination will get her through the experience. As she continues to talk, her strength of character and resolve shines through and you know this to be true.

"I believe I can do this. This is my goal. I will get through this one way or the other," she said.

Although she will be bitterly disappointed if she is not selected in the final team, she will be grateful to have made it to Scandinavia and to have met all the other women. She will also be grateful to have shared the experience with Athina who she will feel ecstatic for "because it's going to be an amazing experience".

When Athina speaks it's almost as if she has surprised herself in applying for the expedition. Nevertheless it's clear that this is something she has set her mind on and intends to see through to the end. This could be because the Electrical Engineering graduate is a big believer in inspiration and fulfilling goals, something she makes sound so simple.

"First you need to be inspired, then you set your goal and then you go for it," she laughs.

Stephanie is also raring to go.

"It feels absolutely ecstatic. There is no other way to describe it. I'm really looking forward to the challenge."

"On September 1 I'm going to start training," the former English School student said. Swimming and tennis are just two of the activities the former House Captain intends to include in her exercise regime.

But according to the application, team members do not need to be a super fit athletes as training will be provided. Athina said this fact had helped her feel more confident about her application. Nevertheless she had recently taken up walking outdoors as a first push towards getting into shape ahead of the two-week training session in Scandinavia. Although exercise might be a shock to her system, the cold will not. Given a choice of summer or winter, Athina said she'd go for winter. Having studied in Hungary, with temperatures of -10C to -15C, the electrical engineering graduate said she was well used to the cold.

The two women know that the idea behind the expedition is much more than setting national records.

"It sounds weird but I've found that people who meet me or have heard about it have become inspired by this. People have come up to me and said they are starting something that they hadn't done but had always wanted to. I've realised that one of the aims of the expedition about making your ambitions a reality is already happening," Athina said.

She also said she was grateful to the Commonwealth for organising the expedition and for giving her the opportunity to take part in the whole process. According to the expedition's website it is hoped that all the women taking part will act as role models on their return, undertaking a programme of lectures and school talks to inspire others in their home-countries to strive to make their ambitions a reality, whatever the challenges they may face.

"I hope this injects some enthusiasm into others to do what they want to do. No matter how small, people should just go for their dreams. It is better to attempt and fall over during the process than to always be left wondering," Stephanie said.

The successful candidate will keep a journal of the expedition and use the website as a blog. For more information www.commonwealthexpedition.com

-ENDS-

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Empowering Bruneian women

The Brunei Times

Monday, July 14, 2008

THIS is one invitation that should not be missed. Bruneian women have been invited to compete and win the only slot to represent the nation to an all-female team to ski to the South Pole next year. To be made up by representatives from Cyprus, Ghana, India, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, New Zealand, Jamaica and the United Kingdom, the team will ski more than 500 miles across the icy wastes of Antarctica to reach the South Pole by January 1, 2010.

The 30 to 50-day journey will involve sleeping in tents on ice in temperatures of -30 degrees C, pulling sledges of food, fuel and equipment weighing 80kg, battling vicious snowstorms and avoiding treacherous crevasses.

The challenges facing this mission will imaginably be abundant.

However, expedition leader Felicity Aston has assured the Bruneian women by saying that they were not necessarily looking for "super-human athletes" for the mission.

"What is really important is the determination to succeed and a passion for adventure."

Hopefully, this will be more of a regular event and will help spread the message that Bruneian women are strong and ready to take up challenges not only for South Pole missions but for life in general.

Hopefully, this event will be one amongst many other programmes that empower Bruneian women, especially those who come from the so-called "dysfunctional families" or have been exposed to abuse in order to stop the vicious cycle of domestic violence.

It is with sadness that we learn that the number of domestic violence cases in Brunei has increased by 264 per cent between the years 2000 and 2007. The Brunei Times reported that according to the statistics from the Community Development Centre, incidents of domestic violence increased from 81 cases in 2000 to 214 cases last year.

But those who pay attention to the subject knows that for every one case reported to the authorities, there are at least two cases that have gone unreported or are continuing unnoticed. This is because some women choose to suffer in silence or are tortured into silence. Minister of Health Pehin Dato Hj Suyoi Hj Osman has attributed the persistent scourge of domestic violence to the absence of legislation specifically to address the problem.

So legislations are a needed tool of combat. Legislation is, however, only one among many important steps that the whole community should undertake. To the government's credit, there have been efforts to educate the public about domestic violence through various media including the Friday khutbah. Imams last Friday spoke of the need for authorities on various levels to combat it, adding that if the issue was not addressed, its victims may suffer negative effects, such as emotional stress and neglect.

Family members, neighbours and the surrounding community should act quickly if they learn of domestic violence in their vicinity through words of advice which would show their caring attitudes.

One American Muslim writer Abdul Malik Mujahid wrote thus: "Husband, brother, father. In Islam, these are ties of mercy and love, tempered with justice and right living. Those who use and abuse these relationships out of their own twisted sense of 'honour' must ask themselves, how will they recover their honour before God, in front of Whom we will all stand accountable one day? How can we ever justify domestic violence of any and every kind?"

Violence against women is not an Islamic tradition. In fact, Islam teaches its followers to be kind to women and that the best among men are those who are the best in conduct towards his families. Violence against women shouldn't be something that is associated with Brunei Darussalam. The fight against it should be a shared burden for every member of the public in this peaceful country.

-ENDS -

Jamaican Women Selected for International Expedition to South Pole
Jamaican Information Service
Saturday, October 25, 2008

The Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition, has selected two Jamaican women to bid for a place on an all-female expedition skiing to the South Pole next year.

Kim-Marie Spence and Alecia Maragh, have been chosen to go on to the next selection phase, a two-week training camp in Scandinavia, to take place at the end of February next year. Some 25 women from Jamaica applied to join the team but a short-list of just 10 candidates were interviewed by expedition leader, Felicity Aston, in Kingston.

The woman eventually selected to join the expedition team will become the first Jamaican to ski to the South Pole. A release from the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition said neither candidate has any previous expedition or cold-weather experience but 30 year old Kim-Marie has travelled widely, volunteering in places such as Japan, Israel and India. By taking part in the expedition Kim-Marie hopes to convince other Jamaicans "that they have no limits". A keen long-distance runner, she wants to "publicise the strength of women and their ability to achieve physically".

Meanwhile, 21 year old Alecia Maragh from Spanish Town, St. Catherine, who recently completed a degree in Political Science and International Relations, said the expedition offers the opportunity for personal development in a most unconventional way.

It will allow the merging and mixing of cultures and I want to be that cultural ambassador for my country," she said when asked why she wanted to participate in the expedition.

The expedition will see an eight-woman team representing the Commonwealth countries of Cyprus, Ghana, India, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, New Zealand, Jamaica, and the United Kingdom, ski more than 500 miles across the icy wastes of Antarctica to reach the South Pole on New Year's Day 2010.

The 30 to 40 day journey will involve sleeping in tents on the ice in temperatures down to 30°C, pulling sledges full of food, fuel and equipment weighing 80kg, battling through vicious snowstorms and avoiding treacherous crevasses hidden beneath the snow surface.

-ENDS-

Appendix C : Itinerary

August 13 : Depart London Heathrow for Larnaca, Cyprus

August 13 – 20 : Nicosia

August 20 : Fly from Cyprus to Accra, Ghana

August 20 – 24 : Accra

August 25 – 26 : Cape Coast, Elmina and surrounding villages

August 27 : Fly from Ghana to New Delhi, India

August 28 – September 02 : New Delhi

September 03 : Fly from India to Singapore

September 03 – 09 : Singapore

September 10 : Fly from Singapore to Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam

September 10 – 14 : Bandar Seri Begawan

September 15 – 16 : Muara, Labi, Kuala Belait

September 17 : Fly from Brunei to Singapore

September 18 – 19 : Fly from Singapore to Wellington, New Zealand

September 19 – 22 : Wellington

September 23 : Fly from Wellington to Christchurch, New Zealand

September 23 – October 05 : Christchurch

October 06 – 09 : Fly from New Zealand to Montego Bay, Jamaica

October 09 – 15 : Montego Bay, the north coast and the Blue Mountains

October 16 – 19 : New Kingston

October 20: Fly from Jamaica to the UK

Appendix D : Biography of Candidates

Stephanie Solomonides (Cyprus)

Stephanie Solomonides is a 25-year-old IT Implementation Officer from Nicosia. Stephanie attended The English School in Nicosia and graduated with a BA (hons) in Sociology from the University of Durham, followed by an MSc in Environmental Social Science from Kent University. She hopes that an experience such as this expedition will also inspire others in Cyprus to push their boundaries and fulfil their dreams.

Athina Rokopou (Cyprus)

Athina Rokopou is a 28-year-old Telecommunications Technology Consultant from Athienou in Larnaca district. She works in Nicosia and has recently been working on ground breaking satellite tele-ecography systems which allow a land-based doctor to examine ship-based patients. Athina hopes that by taking part in this expedition she will be able to let more people know something about her country.

Sheillah Boachie-Danquah (Ghana)

Sheillah Boachie-Danquah is a 24 year old graduate from the University of Cape Coast (Ghana), with a degree in Biochemistry. She has just completed a year of National Service and was inspired to apply to the expedition because she wanted to send a message to all women about breaking new terrain. 'It is not just the fun aspect,' she says, 'it takes courage, determination and above all the zeal to make this a success. I believe this is an opportunity to learn new things from seven different countries and to help enhance some aspect of women in my community by giving younger ladies hope and role models they can look up to. Above all, I will be a true representative of my Beautiful country GHANA.'

Barbara Yanney (Ghana)

Barbara Erefua Yanney is a 29-year old freelance writer, who became the youngest magazine editor in Ghana in 1999. She was educated in Aburi Girls' Secondary School in Ghana's Eastern Region but completed her education at Essex County College in New Jersey, USA. Having returned to settle in Ghana and currently living in Accra, Barbara now works for a variety of publications. 'This is the script Hollywood hasn't even thought about writing yet,' she says, 'I can't wait to give the World descriptions of this mystical place and treacherous but thrilling adventure.'

Aparna Ray (India)

Aparna Ray is a 27-year-old lawyer who has just started the training programme to join the Indian Foreign Service. As a lawyer, Aparna regularly worked to defend women's rights and in 2005 designed and implemented a prisoner's rights project for women in a Mumbai prison. Aparna is looking forward to seeing snow for the first time in Scandinavia!

Reena Dharmshaktu (India)

Reena Kaushal Dharmshaktu is a 38-year-old freelance outdoor instructor from Darjeeling, currently settled in Delhi. She is an extremely experienced mountaineer, having taken part in, and led, several Indian Mountaineering Federation expeditions in the Himalaya. However, this will be her first expedition on skis!

Sophia Pang (Singapore)

Sophia Pang is a 36-year-old mother of three who combines freelance work as both an IT Consultant and aerobics instructor - including kickboxing! 'I chanced upon this opportunity to do something I like, to be myself,' she explains, 'It is also an opportunity to show other women that they should appreciate themselves more.' When Sophia submitted her application, her daughter said it would 'be a miracle' if her mother was selected - so this is proof then, that miracles do happen! Sophia wrote, 'It will be my message to my daughter that we must dare to dream and try.'

Lina Goh (Singapore)

Lina Goh is a 36-year-old Senior Engineer at the National University of Singapore working in the field of Sustainable Development. She has a background in watersports - kayaking, rowing and dragon boating - and is a natural organiser, having founded a ladies multi-sports team, acted as team manager for the Singapore Rowing Association and led a Singapore Adventure Racing Team. Lina says, 'I love the outdoors and have been feeling the itch to push myself and my own limits again for the past few years. This is going to be an amazing and humbling experience for me.'

Aniza Ishak (Brunei Darussalam)

Aniza is a 19-year-old air hostess from Bandar Seri Begawan who feels that just becoming fit enough to take part in the expedition will be an accomplishment in itself. She aims to become 'an Asian lady version of Indiana Jones'! Her reasons for wanting to take part include 'to glorify my country, to make history and to make the most of the chance for Bruneians to participate in a worldwide event.'

Dk Najibah Eradah binti P. A. M. Al-Sufri Pg M-L Kahar (Brunei Darussalam)

Era is a 25-year-old Diplomatic Officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Previously a secondary school Mathematics teacher for 3 years, Era describes herself as 'a conscientious and outdoorsy adventurous person' who ran the Brunei Marathon in 2005. She is passionate about environmental issues and hopes to use her involvement in the expedition to raise awareness in Brunei of Global Warming and Climate Change.

Charmaine Tate (New Zealand)

Charmaine Tate is a 33-year old Doctor from Auckland currently serving in the New Zealand Army. Having taken part in a number of multi-sport endurance events in New Zealand, Charmaine conducts research into enhancing physical and mental performance, overcoming fatigue, nutrition, injury prevention and treatment - knowledge which will doubtless come in handy during the expedition! Through this expedition Charmaine not only wants to challenge herself mentally and physically but

would like to 'impress upon the World the vital role that Antarctica plays in shaping every environmental system that we survive on.'

Melanie Money (New Zealand)

Melanie is a 33-year old Nurse from Lower Hutt near Wellington (although she has a house in Wanaka). A patriotic Kiwi, she has recently returned to New Zealand after a stint working abroad, including three months teaching first aid training in Afghanistan last year. She's loved the snow since a child and has been skiing for 28 years, trying every variety of the sport from alpine and touring, to telemarking and snowboarding. Explaining why she wanted to be part of the expedition, Melanie wrote, 'to be able to work with a team of international women, sharing different cultures and strengths in an environment that will not only be challenging but an incredible journey and being able to communicate all this back to the World at a time when global issues are of major concern will be both positive and inspirational for those that follow the expedition.'

Kim-Marie Spence (Jamaica)

Thirty year old Kim-Marie Spence from Kingston loves trail-running and travelling, having volunteered all over the World, including periods in Japan, Israel and India. She works and strategizes for a regional think tank and has been involved in a number of other social initiatives. She describes herself as 'a highly motivated and very curious person - motivated enough to apply and follow through on the things I want; and curious enough for those things to be sometimes off the beaten path'. Kim-Marie hopes that her inclusion on the team will show other Jamaican women that 'they have no limits'.

Alecia Maragh (Jamaica)

Alecia Maragh from Spanish Town is a 21-year-old graduate of the University of West Indies. By taking part in the expedition, Alecia is looking forward to 'not only adventure but friendship, teamwork, hardship, cooperation and laughter in the context of the battle against the elements'. Alecia aims to be a role-model whose example will empower women across creeds, races and cultures and to apply her personal motto to the expedition: 'laugh easily, love earnestly, learn everything I can, listen to my heart and lean on God'.

Helen Turton (UK)

Helen Turton is a 43-year-old freelance outdoor teacher, expedition leader and outdoor education advisor from the Peak District. Helen has already taken part in skiing expeditions to both the Arctic and Antarctic and is keen to demonstrate the positive role model of females in the outdoor industry. She says, 'I hope to learn so much in all manner of ways from such a diversity of team members, and in exchange, share some of the lessons that I have learnt from my previous polar expeditions, and the importance of following your dreams in life. More than anything, I hope to bring a reminder of the value of laughter - when the going gets tough, it's the one essential quality that everybody will need.'