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No mountain too high for big-hearted daring duo

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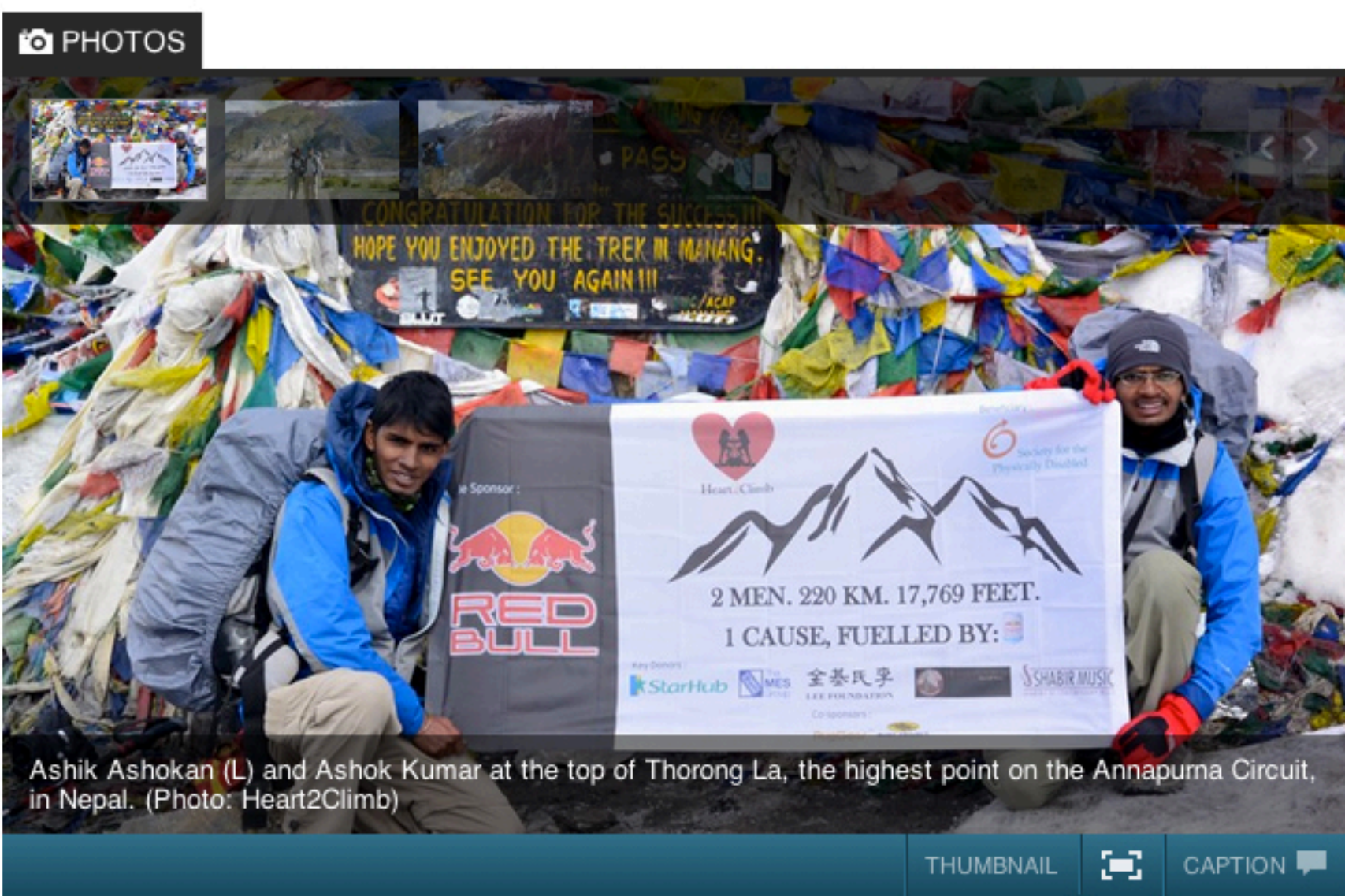
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Two undergraduates had their heads in the clouds, literally, and their hearts firmly rooted after making a risky trek up the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal with one lofty aim -- to raise funds for the Society for the Physically Disabled in Singapore.



SINGAPORE: For someone to put his life on the line for strangers requires a great deal of courage, and two undergraduates did just that to raise S\$50,000 for the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) in Singapore, to mark the movement's 50th anniversary.

Ashik Ashokan and Ashok Kumar decided to take on an arduous 21-day trek up the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal, all in the name of charity.

While the 23-year-olds are not the first to take on the 220-kilometre hike, they are one of the brave few to attempt it without the help of any guide or porter.

"You should carry your own load and shouldn't rely on anyone," said Ashok of the mantra adopted by both him and his teammate, which ties in with SPD's mission to help people with disabilities lead independent lives.

"We wanted to raise awareness [for SPD] because we felt that Singaporeans weren't really aware of the physically disabled in Singapore," said business student Ashok, who set his sights on helping SPD after listening to a talk by its president Chia Yong Yong.

Ashik, a communications and new media student at the National University of Singapore, added: "When we chose [SPD], we realised that our next adventure would be mountain climbing... because the disabled 'climb mountains' each day.

"If we undertake a 21-day expedition, our challenges are limited to the 21 days" said Ashik while pointing out that the disabled face a lifetime of challenges.

But it's not to say that the pair didn't have to weather hardships during their climb -- including severe food poisoning the day before climbing the summit.

"It was so unexpected... we were motivating each other... then two hours later I was vomiting my dinner out. And two hours later again ... and then the third time it was all blood and stomach juice," Ashok recounted.

"He (Ashik) thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to die."

During the climb, Ashik and Ashok spurred each other on with stories of the challenges that their disabled friends at SPD face every day.

On terra firma, at the start of the duo's campaign, Heart2Climb, it was a different set of struggles.

"We're still very humbled by the fact that when we first started off no one received it well," said Ashik, who was told to concentrate on his studies and that the trek was not possible because he "did not have the experience".

The silver lining appeared when Dr Kumaran Rasappan, who was the first Singaporean to climb Mount Everest for charity, offered his full support.

"He's the first person to actually welcome it full-on. Even though we had nothing, no experience. He was behind us... continuously giving us support," said Ashik.

"He's a very good mentor."

But even with their mentor's support, Ashik and Ashok had to struggle to raise funds for their climb and for SPD.

"There was a period of time, for a complete month, when we had not a single dollar coming in from anybody," said Ashok. "We were so desperate, knocking on everybody's door."

Things finally took a turn for the better when Red Bull came in to sponsor their expedition, and StarHub agreed to match donations dollar-for-dollar up to S\$10,000, which was the amount that was donated by Mohamed Abdul Jaleel, founder and CEO of the MES Group.

Along with the help of some of their close friends, they managed to gather more donations from individuals and various foundations to reach the target of S\$50,000.

Having scaled great heights for a good cause, the pair do not intend to stop there.

They are already thinking of their next adventure and how through it, they can help SPD and other people in need.

SPD's executive director, Abhimanyau Pal, thinks that Ashik and Ashok are an inspiration for Singapore's youth.

"We are seeing so much negativity everywhere... but these two boys are really amazing.

"I think it's good to see that our society is getting caring, and I think that is maybe a strong message for the younger population that you can do so much."

- CNA/sf