



Arlene Blum

er contemporaries were not yet 800 feet
t they had trekked and climbed far up
heights. Killer avalanches were thunder-
and fierce storms were threatening worse.
decide whether to sustain the drive or
for the summit or concede defeat.

Preparing the Expedition

ARE filled with sacred peaks. Machha-
rn-like spire over Nepal's second largest
abode of the gods and off limits to all mor-
ummit remains one of the few major peaks
timbers have never set foot. Others, such as
he homes of lesser spirits. Many have been
he deities with which they are associated:
ace, means "harvest goddess," one of Hin-

Arlene Blum, just getting the chance to assault
Annapurna's heights had been a seemingly endless climb.
Despite a long history of women in mountaineering—including
an ascent of Europe's highest mountain, Mont Blanc, by Marie
Pardis in 1808—expedition climbs were still inhospitable to
women in the 1970s. Even Junko Tabei, the Japanese translator
and "housewife" who had been the first woman to reach the
summit of Mount Everest in 1975, had been criticized by a
Japanese newspaper for leaving her husband and children at
home to pursue a "selfish hobby."

Blum's experience had been little different. She had applied
to join an expedition to Afghanistan in 1969, only to learn that
her otherwise exemplary high-altitude experience left her dis-
qualified: "One woman and nine men," the organizer wrote,
"would seem to me to be unpleasant high on the open ice,"
undercutting the "masculine companionship which is so vital a
part of the joy of an expedition." A year later she saw an adver-
tisement for a commercial climb of Alaska's Mount McKinley—
now better known as Denali—with a stricture that women could
come and cook at the base camp but not move above it. When
asked why, the leader explained that women were too frail to
carry the necessary loads and too weak to bear the stress. Even
a male climbing friend warned her off, saying, "You should not
sacrifice life on the same altar of egotism that causes men to join
the Marines, shoot buffalo," and "drive fast cars."

Like so many avocations we embrace, Blum's encounter with
the world of mountaineering had been by accident. She had
been an out-of-shape student during her junior year, 1965, at
Oregon's Reed College, far from her urban roots in Chicago,
when a chemistry lab partner asked if she would come with him
to climb nearby Mount Hood, an ice-covered volcanic peak of
11,245 feet. They studied late and started climbing only at 2
A.M. The pitch-dark start, however, meant that they reached the
summit in a brilliant sunrise. Blum was hooked.

Told that women could only assist climbers of Denali, not