

*“It’s not about how well I do on the hike, or how well I do on the ice and snow. It’s about how well I do on the entire journey.”*

**Kathleen Burns Kingsbury:** Today we have a special treat. We are joined by Courtney Reardon, Director of Institutional Equity Sales, BMO Capital Markets. Courtney also happens to be the 68<sup>th</sup> American woman to summit Everest, and survive. To give you context, only 10 percent of people who climb Everest are women. Needless to say, that’s quite an accomplishment. So today, Courtney will tell us about her expedition, and share the insights she gained along the way that can help all of us become more successful at home and at work. I want to welcome Courtney to the podcast today.

**Courtney Reardon:** Thanks for having me, Kathleen.

**KBK:** So tell me, what inspired you to climb Mount Everest?

**CR:** You know, I never actually ever had the ambition to climb it. I’d been climbing for 10 years, you know, climbing high altitude mountains for 10 years. And the last one I did was in Alaska, Denali. I just sort of missed the expedition lifestyle, and I knew I wanted to climb something big, and if I wanted to do one of the bigger mountains, this sort of seemed like a time in my life that would be a small window that I was able to do it. My husband and I had been married for three years and we don’t have kids yet, and we knew we wanted to have kids, and you don’t hear about very many mothers with kids that disappear for two months to go pursue their hobbies. So I figured that time was of the essence and that if I wanted to do this, it was the time to do it now. When I went about deciding what mountain to climb, I actually did not want to climb Everest. I thought it would be really crowded, and I was worried about that because that’s how you get cold injuries and other injuries. But, I went through the highest peaks – the 14 highest peaks – and started to look at the different death rates, and success rates. And Everest actually appealed because it had a lot more rescue infrastructure than some of the other mountains. And it was a precursor for climbing a lot of the other mountains. So it’s a chance to actually test how you perform at altitude with a lot of infrastructure around you, and a lot of skilled climbers, at the same time. So, that’s how I kind of ended up there. And then I found a friend who introduced me to somebody who told me about the north side of Everest, which is one that only a third of climbers take on. It’s generally the north side of any mountain is considered a little bit colder, a little bit windier, a little bit more exposed. And for Everest specifically, the north side doesn’t have helicopter rescue. So it’s really only more experienced climbers that go to that side which keeps it less crowded.

**KBK:** So, less crowded, the right time in your life, and like a lot of women, it was really kind of a calculated risk as to what’s next in your climbing career.

**CR:** M-hum, exactly.

**KBK:** I know there’s a lot of challenging things about climbing a mountain. Not from experience; from watching documentaries about people like yourself. But what was the most challenging part of your journey and also, what was the most rewarding part?

**CR:** I think the toughest part is that I wouldn't have signed up to do something if I didn't think that I was going to be able to summit and come back safely. And yet, when I got there – and this has happened on every other mountain that I've climbed – when I get there, there are these moments that shake you. Where your confidence is shaken, and you're really set back. And doubt starts to set in, and it can be overwhelming and you're physically not able to perform to the standards that you had when you were training because of different elements – whether it's just adapting to a new environment, or a lack of oxygen in the air, or you're feeling ill because of food... anything. And you really, you've got a lot of time to think, also. Which maybe we aren't quite so used to. And unfortunately, what you think about is your fears, and you start to feed your fears. Fears of failing. Fears of suffering, and it being really challenging, "Am I really up to this?" And so, the toughest part was having this one day where maybe it was actually our fourth or fifth day at base camp where I went for a little hike with two of my teammates, maybe a two or three hour hike, and I was just winded. I could barely move. My feet weren't moving. It was shocking how terribly I was performing. And this was from base camp. And I was there to climb the entire mountain. So, you know, I basically told my teammates that they should go on. I would turn around and go down, and I was completely deluded. I think I probably cried to myself for three hours, trying not to let anybody know, but...

**KBK:** Sounds really hard.

**CR:** It was terrible. I was embarrassed that I had even showed up thinking that I could climb the mountain. And I called my husband the next day. He was back home in New York City, and I told him what had happened, and how I was feeling. And he was, he had a totally different reaction than I did. He was saying, 'What makes you think that you could keep up with these guys? Your teammates are ultramarathoners who run races that last 24 hours, in the mountains, in the Alps. Why would you think that you could keep up with them on this hike? You know that you're slow. This isn't what your good at! You're good at this other part of climbing that we're going to get to later. Why are you comparing yourself to these guys? Of course they're going to be great. Like, so what? You have one bad day. Don't throw the whole thing out. You should be happy you're on a team that's this capable.' And I was. And I was like, 'okay, okay.' I was going to believe him for the moment just so I could keep going, but we'll see. I'm probably going to fail later. But let's see how this goes. That was really a low point for me.

**KBK:** And so he really gave you perspective even though it was in a different way. And I can hear you kind of smiling as you tell that so certainly it was helpful in the moment.

**CR:** Yeah! He was like, 'this is great! You're on a really capable team.' In his mind, he was thinking, 'you obviously can do this. And thank god this is your toughest day because they're going to have their toughest day later on. And so, this isn't a sign of what's to come; this is something you had to get out of the way.'

**KBK:** Oh, interesting! That must have been really helpful. Now, it may be an obvious question, but what was the most rewarding part of the journey?

**CR:** It's funny. I feel like everybody wants to think it's the summit day. But for me, it was actually the day that it took about maybe three more weeks until that nagging fear went away. Two more weeks, let's

say. And my teammates and I were much higher on the mountain. We were at about 23,000 feet, 24,000 feet. We were up at camp one, and we were going on like a little hike to see if we could go towards camp two, but not sleep there. Just to kind of push our bodies a bit higher in altitude. And this time, we were on snow and ice. Previously, when I was sucking wind, we were on rocks, and stones, and skree which is like loose gravel almost. So on the snow and ice, this is what I tend to be very good at. It's reverse. You'd think that people would be better at the easier stuff. For whatever reason, I'm better at the harder part. We get to the snow and ice and we're walking up. We'd spent the night there, and I'm very comfortable camping on snow because I spent 17 days on a glacier in Alaska on my last climb which is more than my other teammates had. And my guide and I are up in the front, and we're walking, and we're walking, and we're moving together. And we stop maybe an hour into it, and we look back... and the guys on my team are WAY down there! I thought that they were teasing me. They were hunched over, breathing heavily, and I thought that they were playing a practical joke on me. When they finally caught up, they said that they couldn't keep up with me. They were shocked themselves, I think. I wasn't competing with them by any means, but it was a moment when I realized I am good at this part. I'm not good at that part. Why am I comparing myself to them in their element, when this is now my element. It's not about how well I do on the hike, or how well I do on the ice or snow. It's about how well I do on the entire journey. Up to the summit, and down. It doesn't matter; you can't analyze each little bit and how you're performing relative to other people in every chapter of the book. It's about finishing the book.

**KBK:** Awesome. So basically, the most rewarding day was when you found your confidence and really got that perspective yourself as opposed to needing it.

**CR:** Completely. Completely.

**KBK:** As opposed to needing it from your husband or someone outside of yourself.

**CR:** And there's a famous quote in climbing. That it's not about conquering the mountain, it's about conquering yourself.

**KBK:** I imagine that must be true. And also being a woman that's on an all-male team except for obviously you. So I found an interesting statistic here... that while women are only 10 percent of the climbers, the success rate for women is higher than men. So, on average, 32 percent of male climbers reach the summit on their first attempt; however 43 percent of females do so. As a woman, I don't know if you knew that stat as you were climbing up.

**CR:** I didn't! But I had a hunch...

**KBK:** Okay, so tell me. What are the challenges, and maybe what are the advantages of being a female who is on a team summiting Everest. And also, if there's anything transferrable to kind of your daily job in that respect?

**CR:** Well, maybe this isn't the best aspect, but one of the guys got a call from his girlfriend the day before we left for our summit push, and she had a message for me. She needed me to make it to the summit on behalf of women.

**KBK:** Hah! No pressure!

**CR:** Yeah, no pressure! I was like, 'You know what? If she feels that way, she should be here climbing with me!' But at the same time, that little chip on the shoulder that you gotta represent when you're there. You know, 10 percent's a really small minority. So that feeling of, you know, I'm doing this for more than just myself is kind of present. And then, you know I also think that, look, I'm not as strong as the guys physically. I can't compete in some of the physical challenges so what I do is I prepare really well. I make sure I have the lightest gear. I didn't bring my camera; I used my phone. Anything where I could cut weight so that it was a little bit easier for me, I did that, and I invested in that. And I also think, you know, I wasn't very confident. And in that way, it made me train a lot harder. One thing that I did to train was I would go on this treadmill that had a 30 percent incline, and I had a 50 pound weight vest, and I climbed it for 4,000 vertical feet.

**KBK:** Wow!

**CR:** The guide company, and my husband (who works in professional sports), all told me that that was too much. I didn't need to do that much. But, I needed to mentally because that's twice – well, summit day is 2,000 vertical feet, roughly – and I wanted to do twice that in a controlled environment so that mentally, I knew that when it came to it, I had done more than that. You don't train to what you need to do on performance day. You train above that. I think you train above it. For me, it was so much more mental because summit day, I couldn't have recreated it. It was impossibly difficult at times. I don't know how I made it through. So I couldn't recreate that in a controlled environment if I wanted to. But mentally, I did. So I felt prepared with what would come next because I trained harder than I thought I would need to.

**KBK:** Let's think for a minute on how that might transfer to working in a male dominated industry. Whether that's banking, tech, the business world in general. Is there anything you can think of that you learned on that mountain that you go, 'Wow, that's really applicable in the work that I do, or something that I might coach another one of my colleagues to the thinking about?'

**CR:** I think the big part is comparing your strengths and weaknesses to other people. Because you can't adopt somebody else's style, and emulate it perfectly. You have to adopt your own style. And in doing so, you're actually letting your strengths shine through better. If I had tried to keep up with those guys on the lower part of the mountain on the hike, I would have spent all my energy and wouldn't have been able to perform as well as I typically do when we get to the upper parts on the snow and ice. Mentally, and physical energy. So I think if I could do it over again, I would say to myself, on the lower parts of the mountain, 'relax. Chill out. Yeah, you're not going to be as fast. Don't worry about it. We'll get to your part.' I think in a work environment, that's the case as well. You have to really know your strengths and weaknesses, and you can't perfectly emulate someone else.

**KBK:** You had mentioned before that climbing is not only physical, it's mental. And what we're talking about right now is really comparing yourself to others, and how ultimately, that can zap your energy. As opposed to focusing on, 'what am I good at? What am I adding to the team?' And it sounds like you did a lot of physical prep, that you did to prepare yourself for the mental part of Everest. How did you wrap your brain around the fact that this was a two-month experience and expedition, and that there is a death rate that goes along with climbing Everest?

**CR:** Well, I know this won't sound right, but I'm very risk averse.

**KBK:** Haha! So you climbed Everest! Yeah.

**CR:** So when I announced this to clients and colleagues internally, I made a joke that, I wouldn't, for the summit, I wouldn't sacrifice a fingertip, or a nostril, or any part of my body to frostbite because I'm too vain for that. But the reality is that, mentally I decided that if I failed in my attempt on my first try – which, as you know, people do, I would just do it over again. And in that way, I would have a better sense as to what I could do differently, and what I could do better. And there's a point at which I wasn't worried about letting other people down, or having this visible failure. Because, I had tried. I had signed up to do this. I had prepared, and trained to do it. I was qualified to do it. So if I failed, who's going to criticize me? The small fraction of people who had also tried and succeeded? So I sort of felt like I was willing to take a shot, and even letting myself be comfortable with the concept of failure was a big thing.

**KBK:** So, you had mentioned fear. And certainly fear is part of climbing Mount Everest. And there's also a fear anytime we're trying something new. What advice would you have for women entrepreneurs or professionals out there who are facing their fears?

**CR:** I think that fear is something we often talk about conquering, but in fact, it's a useful tool to guide you and motivate you through the goal. What I mean is that, I try to listen to what my fears are. In this case, it wasn't necessarily fear of failing because if I fail I can just try to climb this mountain again. And I realize that's unique because in business I realize that might not be the case. But it was about fear of suffering. Suffering is inherently a part of mountaineering, and it just comes with the territory. I've known that on prior climbs, and it is the case. Knowing that, I felt much more motivated in my training. I did not want to miss a workout. Physically, I needed them, and mentally, I REALLY needed them. Because they kind of helped me build up my mental defences of the moment when I'm doubting myself, when I'm feeling weak, that I can say, 'No. This is the best training I have ever done. I didn't miss any workouts. I didn't miss any step. I'm actually prepared.' So I think actually using fear as a guide and a motivator was huge for me. Gravitates towards what you're afraid of. What are the steps you need to take in order to mitigate those fears from coming to fruition, or minimize their impact if they do come to fruition. OR, figure out when they do happen, 'here's how I'm going to handle it.' So you feel prepared, and in the moment you're not panicked, and you don't have all these different variables screaming at you.

**KBK:** What else did you need to do in order to accomplish this feat?

**CR:** I loved training. It was surprising to me. Most people train for a year. I did it in three months. But, my husband is in the sports medicine field so I do have a professional 'on staff' if you will. But I loved it because it made me – in a good way – very selfish with my time, and very structured with my time. I really had to prioritize how I was going to spend my time and energy. And I also hadn't told anybody in the office what I was doing. They didn't know. I didn't let my work slip whatsoever. So, all of my free time was spent training and sleeping. And every once in a while I would allow myself to have a little fun, and go out with friends, and socialize, and it was a reward for the work I had done. And I enjoyed it all the more. The best thing about it was that I was adamant about getting enough sleep because I needed it to feed my training. And I know myself. It's the base on which everything is built. So I developed this habit of actually sleeping for eight hours a night which was revolutionary for me.

**KBK:** It's revolutionary for everyone! I hear it's the best thing you can do to take care of yourself. I can only imagine what it's like – and I will only imagine because I'm not a very good hiker so climbing Everest is not on my bucket list. But I'm glad it was on yours, and you accomplished it – but I can only imagine what it's like to be reaching the summit of Everest, and what that does to your confidence level. So, is it truly a big confidence builder like I think it would be? And how does that kind of live with you today now that you're off the mountain?

**CR:** You know, it's funny because my family was so proud of me, and now we're all over it. And it's back to normal, and my normal self. Which is good because there's this saying: You're never a prophet in your own hometown. So it's probably a good thing. It was definitely a confidence booster in that every once in a while I can sit back and think, 'why am I nervous about this? I did something that I was so much more terrified of, and look how it turned out.' I guess, going into it, I thought I could do it, and then overcoming the doubt was the big reward. By the time that I overcame the doubt with that moment where I was climbing faster than my teammates, the summit was inevitable to me. But just having that experience, and having that shared experience, I feel honoured that I've had that experience with all these other climbers that have done it. Knowing what they've gone through, and knowing what the first climbers went through to get there, and now what somebody who works in finance 60 hours a week and lives in New York City can follow in their footsteps can accomplish something? Putting it in that kind of perspective was incredible for me. I definitely do feel a thirst to learn more, a thirst to challenge myself. Like, give me anything you've got throw it at me, and we'll see how I can handle it.

**KBK:** Yeah, a 'bring it on' kind of philosophy.

**CR:** Exactly! Yeah, yeah.

**KBK:** I'm sure you get asked this a lot: Will you climb Everest again, and if so, why? And if not, why not?

**CR:** I would love to climb it again! I usually have a rule that I don't allow myself to plan my next expedition, or even talk about my next expedition for at least a month or two after I get back. Unfortunately, on my wedding anniversary (I actually got back in time for that. I was supposed to miss it), I told my husband I would want to go back to do it again without supplemental oxygen. Only (I think) seven women have done it. And only 200, or 250 people globally have done it. But I don't think that's in the cards.

**KBK:** You really do like to push yourself, and live a little outside that comfort zone.

**CR:** I do! I feel that's where growth happens. It's the most rewarding, fulfilling thing. It feeds my soul. It's incredible. And I just think that the moments I have doubt, or a lack of self-confidence, it gets all rebuilt in those moments on the mountains.

**KBK:** So I'm wondering, you know, one of the things is, a lot of the listeners here today are not going to necessarily become climbers – or maybe they will. But, if you had to leave us with one or two tips about how this experience of challenging yourself in this way has led you to be more successful, or more focused, or more comfortable – or whatever it might be at work, what would those tips be so listeners can kind of take away some of your expertise, and feed off this passion and excitement that I hear in your voice about this particular expedition?

**CR:** One thing I thought was really interesting was that people's reaction to the climb. If they're excited about it, or if they're not excited about it, or if I'm talking to somebody at base camp and they seem like they are negative towards me... most of the time, it's about something they are going through. It has very little to do with me. I think maybe – and I don't know if this is a woman thing – but I think in some ways, we take on a lot of responsibility, and assume that we've impacted them in some way to have that reaction. And I think that's less the case than I realize. And then the other thing is knowing your strengths and weaknesses and not trying to compete with somebody when it's their strength and your weakness. Give yourself a pass every once in a while, and don't beat yourself up because you're going to waste your energy on your weakness, and not be able to flex it on your strength. I think that that was a big thing. And then, that you have to take some risk. You can't possibly start a business, or climb Everest without taking any risks. It's a calculated risk and you can use whatever you're afraid of as a motivator to figure out how you're going to prepare yourself better.

**KBK:** I love that. You are certainly an inspiration, Courtney, and I wish you the best on whatever the next climb is for you. And it's been an honour to get to know you a little bit better.

**CR:** Thank you so much for having me Kathleen!

**KBK:** Thank you.