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HOW TUTUS AND TRAILS MAKE THE BEST MOTHER'S DAY TALES

Each year on Mother's Day, something magical happens at Mount St. Helens. At almost 6 a.m. on the dot, sleepy mountaineers begin making their way up the normally imposing, often snow-covered volcano in herds.

They chatter relentlessly between themselves, for once excited about sharing the trail with hundreds of other climbers. Strangers don't exist—only potential friends. Laughter echoes from the stony parking lot to the snowy summit. As the sun comes up, it illuminates a scene unlike any other—a backcountry costume ball of sorts. Gone are the Gore-Tex jackets and windproof mountaineering pants. In their place are elegant ball gowns, glittery tutus and suggestive fishnet stockings. And that's not even the half of it. The women also are dressed to kill.

If it sounds like Mardi Gras on the mountain, you've guessed correctly. It's also one of the most beloved traditions in Washington mountaineering. For nearly 30 years now, climbers of all ages, genders and abilities have attempted to summit Mount St. Helens on Mother's Day weekend—and ski, snowboard, sled or glissade down—in honor of moms everywhere.

– By Cassandra Overby –



THE LADY WITH THE PINK FLAMINGOS

Most outrageous traditions have their roots in outrageous people, and the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb is no exception. The festive event owes its shine to Kathy Phibbs, a Northwest mountaineer who was equal parts climber and firecracker. Phibbs cofounded the all-volunteer nonprofit Women Climbers Northwest in 1983.

"[Climbing] was a pretty male-dominated activity at the time and she really wanted to encourage women to take on more leadership in activities in the outdoors," says Colleen Hinton, the current leader of the organization. "And [Phibbs] had a really fun approach to it. She wanted it to be a fun experience for the women out there, not as serious as the men's alpine clubs that existed at the time."

The carrot-topped woman with the crooked smile brought her inimitable sense of humor to the task. She donned costumes, started zany traditions and even developed her own Ten Essentials.

"Kathy was a big fan of wearing tutus on climbs because they didn't get in the way of much," Hinton explains. "She also started a tradition of planting pink flamingos on summits and taking [them] on camping outings. So we would all carry pink flamingos on the backs of our packs."

In the spring of 1987, just after Mount St. Helens reopened to climbers (following its 1980 eruption), Phibbs led a group of four other women up the mountain in costume. At the summit they chanced upon a reporter from the *Seattle Times* who memorialized the encounter in an article for the newspaper.

"After climbing 4 ½ rugged hours to the top of the nation's most famous volcano, no one expected a party," wrote Eric Nalder. "But there, at 8,300 feet on the treacherous rim of Mount St. Helens, [was] a woman in a red chiffon dress and [four] can-can dancers ... [The] five happy women climbers did a can-can dance for the benefit of photographers. One of them, Kathy Phibbs, a 29-year-old climbing guide, had scaled the mountain on cross-country skis. For [her] the climb was a nostalgic return to the mountain. In 1975 on her first climb, she was in high school and the mountain was a perfect, unerupted cone."

The photo of Phibbs made the front page of the *Seattle Times*. "It was just a very fun photo of her in a red chiffon dress with a pillbox hat posing on the top of Mount St. Helens with her telemark skis ... looking very festive," explains Hinton. "It captured who she was." With that one photo, the idea of climbing Mount St. Helens in costume caught the imagination of a state, and a tradition was born.

Climb Snapshot

DISTANCE: 12 miles, round trip

ELEVATION GAIN: 5,500 feet

HIGHEST POINT: 8,364 feet

STARTING POINT: Marble Mountain Sno-Park

MAP: Green Trails #364S

PERMIT: Mount St. Helens Climbing Permit, \$22

Photos by Colleen Hinton, Jamie Levin, Eric Rosenberg, Kyel Russell, Michael Torkildson and Mike Warren. Background photo by Andrew Johnson.



Tales From the Mount

In a cruel twist of fate, the very sport that made Phibbs' soul sing was also the cause of her death only a few short years later. She died in a climbing accident in 1991 after falling from Triple Couloir, an ice climb in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. She was only 33 years old. More than 20 years have passed since then, but Phibbs' light continues to shine; her lighthearted legacy lives on. Indeed, it has taken on a life of its own.

In 2013, the Mount St. Helens Institute issued a record-breaking 667 climbing permits for the Saturday of Mother's Day weekend. Since its inception, it's estimated that more than 10,000 people have participated in the iconic holiday climb. That's 10,000 unique trail stories. We were able to speak with many folks who have participated in the climb in recent years. Here are a few of our favorite stories.

Wearing a Dress for Mom

Although the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb started as an exclusively female event, it quickly became a magnet for mountaineering males who wanted to dress up and have a good time, too. Now, men—even the manliest of men—are among the climb's most enthusiastic contingent. Kyel Russell is one of them. In 2011, he and two U.S. Navy buddies (photo top) decided to climb Mount St. Helens in honor of their mothers.

As Russell explains it, it was payback of sorts. All three guys had gotten into some pretty wild and adventurous things in their twenties—bungee jumping, skydiving and rock climbing. Instead of pressuring them to choose tamer, less risky activities, their moms had been supportive. As a way of saying “thank you,” Russell and his friends decided to dedicate a Mother's Day adventure, and a photo collage, to their moms.

They started like most Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climbers do—with choosing the perfect outfit. “We went dress shopping at Goodwill,” says Russell. “There was a little bit of uneasiness in our group at first, with regards to dressing up like women.”

The unease didn't last. Before long, Russell and his two military friends were trying on a variety of dresses, asking women for fashion advice and posing for pictures. They even learned a little something in the process.

“At 25 years old I learned that those little white straps on the inside of dresses aren't for wearing,” reveals Russell. “They're for hanging them up.”

Although the weather forecast for Mother's Day weekend 2011 was terrible—so much so that many climbers cancelled at the last minute—

Russell and crew did make it to the top of the iconic volcano. In their photos from that day, they grin at the camera from the summit—dresses fluttering in the wind, large, tattooed shoulders

squeezed into spaghetti straps and beers cracked—with a flowered “hey mom” sign cradled in their arms.

“[Our moms] were pretty happy about it,” says Russell. “Every time I talk to one of my sisters or my brother they say, ‘You know you're Mom's favorite, right?’”

Sharing a Mountain Adventure

Russell is not the only one whose participation in the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb has earned him major brownie points. In 2013, Jamie Rose Levin planned the ultimate mother–daughter adventure as a way to celebrate Mother's Day together.

“In 2011, I [did the climb] with my then boyfriend, now fiance,” says Levin. “My mom really loved the pictures (photo middle) and the thought of doing it in a dress. It didn't work out in 2012, but the point was to do it again and take my mom.”

Levin's mother, 56 years old and an active skier, trained in preparation for the climb.

“My mom did a practice trip with a guide service in Colorado,” says Levin. “Then the day of [our climb] we rented her some equipment and taught her the movements she would need ... the basics of using a beacon and a shovel, and what to do in case of an avalanche. Things like that.”

For Levin's mom, a Colorado resident, climbing Mount St. Helens was her introduction both to mountaineering and to some of Washington's best views. “My mom had been on one small hike at Wallace Falls,” says Levin. “This was her first time on a volcano.”

The trip was a hit. “She was excited to spend Mother's Day with me,” proclaims Levin. “And also get a peek inside the world that I normally live in with backcountry skiing. It was fun to show her what this experience was like. She had a blast seeing everyone in dresses. I think we'll definitely try to do it again in the coming years.”

Starting a New Family Tradition

Like Levin, many people become regulars of the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb. That's certainly the case with Bree Loewen. She's a member of Seattle Mountain Rescue and a five-time climb participant. Although Loewen typically does the climb with friends, in 2006 she started a new family tradition by inviting her mom along for the hike.

“Some of [my mom's] friends are in Search and Rescue too,” said Loewen. “She knew one of the ladies fairly well and they were pretty much evenly paced.”

Mother and daughter camped at the trail parking lot together overnight, then hiked at their own paces on the day of the climb. They were treated to sunny and warm conditions. Although the snow was a bit slushy, there was a good boot track up the mountain.

“My mom had a blast,” describes Loewen. “She wore a pretty batik wrap. I think it took us about eight hours round trip—with lunch on the top—but my mom had been doing a lot of hiking beforehand to get in shape. She doesn't ski, so she sledged down

“We went dress shopping at Goodwill. There was a little bit of uneasiness in our group at first, with regards to dressing up like women.”

Kyel Russell, U.S. Navy

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on a plastic trash bag. That actually works pretty well. I really wanted to put her on one of those round disks, but she would've just taken off."

Because it was such a great mother-daughter experience, Loewen hopes the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb will become a family tradition. She's waiting for the day when her own daughter, now five years old, will be old enough and strong enough for the event.

"That's a lot of elevation gain," says Loewen. "You have to have pretty strong legs. Right now we hike Rattlesnake Ledge, and that's about the right distance for us."

Although Loewen's daughter is not ready to continue the family tradition of climbing Mount St. Helens on Mother's Day, it's already something that's on her radar.

"I know that [this year] when we get all dressed up and head out the door, she'll be like, 'I have to stay at grandma's?'"

The Ultimate in Trail Camaraderie

While most people initially participate in the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb to honor their mothers and create lasting traditions, many come back because of the climb's overwhelming sense of community. According to Eric Rosenberg, the experience is in a class of its own.

"[My favorite part of] hiking Mount St. Helens in a dress is the bonding and camaraderie with fellow hikers who are doing the same novel thing," shares Rosenberg (photo bottom).

"What really [strikes] me is that when on a normal hike—if there are a lot of other hikers on the same trail—you tend to complain to yourself or your hiking companion that the trail is too busy and you wish you had the mountain to yourself." He continues, "But on the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb it's the opposite. You want there to be lots of other people wearing dresses, partially so you don't feel quite so silly yourself, but also because there is the instant bond you have with hundreds of complete strangers when you see them trudging up the snow wearing their finest Sunday dress and ski boots, just like you."

"It's a wonderful time for you to get to know people and chat, and it's a wonderful time to get to know a lot of the rest of the community," Loewen echoes. "Usually, when we're in the mountains, we like solitude. But this is a time where you want to see all of your friends. You get 500-plus people all climbing together, and you're not upset because there are so many people on your route. You're just excited to see everyone and get to know [them]. And that's really fun."

"My mom had a blast! She wore a pretty batik wrap. She doesn't ski, so she sledded down on a plastic trash bag."

Bree Loewen
Seattle Mountain Rescue



FLOCKING THE MOUNTAIN: A HOW-TO GUIDE

Despite the fun and frivolity of the event, it's important to remember that the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb is a challenging and potentially hazardous endeavor. For the best memories and the best experience on trail, it's important to know what to expect and how to prepare.

Although the winter climbing route via the Worm Flows Trail is nontechnical, it's not for the faint of heart. The route boasts 12 miles of trail and 5,500 feet of elevation gain. Think trekking up to Camp Muir, only with a longer approach. Overall, expect a 7 to 12 hour round trip (10 hours is the average), depending on how you get down the mountain. Glissading or skiing down offers a significant time advantage but can be more dicey than simply trekking down with snowshoes. Because the route involves scaling an active—albeit resting—volcano, as well as open snowfields, you need to give special consideration to several factors.



FOOTING: Volcanoes can be difficult to climb because of the variety of terrain that climbers encounter: volcanic ash, craggy lava rocks and lots of exposure. Terrain can be soft with rocky rubble and tough to walk in. You may feel like it's two steps forward and one step back. Sharp rocks can cut boots and skin. This challenging and changing terrain is more likely during the summer months. For the Mother's Day climb, the mountain is usually still blanketed in deep snow. All this underscores how important it is to wear appropriate footwear. This includes sturdy hiking boots and either snowshoes, crampons or other traction devices depending on the conditions.



AIR QUALITY: When climbing Mount St. Helens in summertime, the final push to the rim is up a loose and steep ash slope. On Mother's Day, there is often snow. Volcanic ash (i.e., silica, or glass) can be extremely abrasive, as well as harmful when inhaled. High winds, as well as the churning boots of climbers, can blow ash around and make it airborne. It is advisable to wear a dust mask (N95 type) or bandana to cover your nose and mouth to protect your lungs. Protective eyewear is also recommended. Wraparound glasses or goggles can help prevent ash from blowing into your eyes. Dry blowing snow, while not as harmful as ash, can still be an irritant.



ELEVATION: As you climb toward the rim of Mount St. Helens, you are making your way up to 8,300 feet on a fairly strenuous incline. You'll likely be exerting a lot of energy propelling yourself up the mountain. In summer, this can be scrambling up rocky ridges and slogging up loose, sandy ash. In snowy conditions, you'll be slipping and gripping your way up, which will result in lots of heavy breathing. Climbers don't die from elevation sickness on Mount St. Helens, but common effects of altitude are dehydration, headache, nausea and dizziness. It is important to pace yourself accordingly and avoid overexertion.



NAVIGATION: Climbing with such a large number of people can present some tempting opportunities for going on autopilot and following the crowd. Resist the temptation, and don't assume that the people in front of you know where they are going any more than you do. There are several ridges on the Mount St. Helens route, and navigation can be tricky—especially if low clouds suddenly blanket the mountain. Bring your own map and compass, or GPS, and know how to use them. Remember, even when hiking with hundreds of people, you are responsible for your own safety.



WEATHER: The weather on Mount St. Helens can be unpredictable, and oftentimes it changes very quickly. It's not uncommon to start on a clear, bluebird morning and be completely socked in by clouds only a few hours later. Don't wholly rely on the weather forecast. Conditions might look rosy the day before your climb, then become impossible the day of. Past hike participants suggest camping at the trailhead parking lot the night before the climb and assessing the conditions in the morning. Also, some people choose to do the hike on Saturday rather than Sunday if the conditions are expected to be better.



AVALANCHE SAFETY: Even in perfect weather, avalanches on the mountain can be a concern, especially in spring months when warmer temperatures are loosening snow packs. It's important to monitor the avalanche conditions on the route prior to starting the climb. Call the Mount St. Helens Institute or visit its website (mshinstitute.org) for conditions updates, or visit the Northwest Avalanche Center website (nwac.us) for warnings. Before setting out, review the basics of avalanche safety, and pack the appropriate equipment. Know how to react if an avalanche suddenly occurs, and stay alert while climbing.



VOLCANIC ACTIVITY: Remember, Mount St. Helens is an active volcano. Know the eruption warning signs and monitor the proper channels for alerts of volcanic activity. The displays at Johnston Ridge are great for learning more about volcanoes and the signals of an impending eruption. If possible, plan a visit before your climb. Also, take note of any information about current volcanic activity or warnings for climbers at trailheads. According to the USGS, there are usually seven days between the detection of early warning signs of volcanic activity and an eruption. If warning signs do occur, the mountain will be closed to climbing.

Photos, from top: Tracy Durnell, Christopher Tack, Jill Green, Eric Rosenberg, Jackson, Wikimedia, Lyn Topinka/USGS; Background photo by Kyel Russell

ALL DRESSED UP WITH SOMEWHERE TO GO

Once you know what to expect on your Mother's Day climb, it's time to start your preparations. Similar to any hiking outing, you should dress accordingly and carry your Ten Essentials. In the spirit of the tradition, here are some additional considerations, as well as a checklist of what to do and when.

THE PERFECT OUTFIT: One of the best parts of preparing for the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb is choosing the perfect outfit. It's common to wear traditional outdoor clothing underneath your fun attire. After all, you'll be climbing in the snow and you still need to stay warm. But get creative with your top-layer dress and accessories. Most people go shopping with their hiking buddies for these; it's part of the tradition. Get into it! Try on the most ludicrous clothing you can find and accessorize, accessorize, accessorize. But go early, because thrift stores often sell out of women's large and extra-large clothing as the hike approaches. On the morning of the hike, continue with tradition and have an "outfit unveiling" with your group. And don't forget to compliment other people—friends and strangers alike—on their outfits. It's one of the best ways to build rapport with other people on the trail.

PERMITS: Once you've gotten the perfect outfit, it's time to purchase your permit for the climb. Permits are always required to go above 4,500 feet on Mount St. Helens, but Mother's Day weekend is the last weekend that the number of climbers is not restricted to 100 per day. All permits (\$22) must be purchased at least 24 hours in advance and can be ordered online through the Mount St. Helens Institute (mshinstitute.org). You can pick up your permit the day before or the morning of your climb at Lone Fir Resort in Cougar. The resort is located approximately 13 miles from the Marble Mountain Sno-Park, where most people camp the night before the hike. The permit office is open from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. daily, April 1 through October 31. Bring your receipt (not just your confirmation number) and your ID to pick up your permit. If you switch the date of your climb, you'll need to buy a new permit.

GEAR: In addition to having the right outfit and the right permit, having the right gear is essential to enjoying your Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb. Even in all the lighthearted frivolity, you will still be dealing with extreme mountain conditions. See our recommended gear guide on this page.

THE MOUNT ST. HELENS MOTHER'S DAY MANIFESTO

There is one thing we didn't put on the packing list that is an absolute requirement for enjoying the Mount St. Helens Mother's Day climb. It's not something tangible. You can't put it in your pack or wear it on your body. But you can sport it proudly: joie de vivre. In layman's terms: silliness, playfulness and a great big smile.

At the end of the day, this climb isn't about bagging another summit. It's not about challenging yourself on an open snowfield or attempting to backcountry ski. It's not even about bragging rights—although you may feel like you have some after posting all of your amazing (and ridiculous) photos to Facebook. This climb is about fun. Over-the-top, laugh-out-loud, flamboyant fun. Treat it as such.

Wear your outfit proudly. Compliment others loudly and often. Make one new friend—or ten. It's not often that you get an opportunity to share a volcano with hundreds of cross-dressing mountaineers. And whatever you do, don't forget to call your mom on Mother's Day.

Lastly, if you're feeling especially fun, tie a pink flamingo to your pack and plant it on the summit of Mount St. Helens in honor of the amazing woman who birthed such an incredible tradition. Kathy Phibbs, this one's for you. ♦

Gear List:

- The Ten Essentials
- Sturdy hiking boots
- Snowshoes or traction devices
- Goggles or sunglasses
- Gaiters (to keep snow out)
- Sunscreen
- Something to slide down on: skis, sled disc, garbage bag
- Mandatory: "Hi Mom" or "I Love You Mom" sign
- Recommended: Bandana or dust mask (N95 type)
- Optional: Climbing helmet

Weeks Before:

- Go dress shopping
- Order your permit

Days Before:

- Watch to see if the mountains are getting a lot of snow
- Pick up your permit
- View a video tour of the climbing route
- Visit the Johnston Ridge Observatory

Day of:

- Check NOAA (noaa.gov) for a mountain-specific forecast
- Check MWAC (nwac.us) for avalanche warnings
- Check the Forest Service for Mt. St. Helens climbing updates
- Call ranger to verify conditions

Kathy Phibbs' 10 Essentials

- ✓ Chocolate
- ✓ Pesto
- ✓ Flip-flops
- ✓ Dog
- ✓ Mystery novel
- ✓ Cognac
- ✓ Lawn chair
- ✓ Tutu
- ✓ Pink flamingo
- ✓ Salsa



*For more information on climbing Mount St. Helens, including a helpful resource list and information links, please visit wta.org/sthelens.