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fitness

Take the stairs, all 1,098 of them

By William Porter
The Denver Post

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Come Sunday, several thousand people — at least one of them lugging an oxygen tank on his back — will assemble in the Republic Plaza downtown and start climbing the 1,098 stairs to the 56th floor.

While it might sound like Denver's largest fire drill in reverse, it's actually the sixth annual Fight for Air Climb, a fundraiser for the American Lung Association in Colorado. The participants, some of them lone climbers and others operating as teams, will try to raise more than \$425,000 for association programs here.

If your legs and lungs feel up to it, there is still time to register at fightforairclimb.org. Bring a good pair of shoes, however. At 714 feet, Republic Plaza remains the tallest building in the Rocky Mountain region.

"It's a great event and just a lot of fun," said Doug Striker, who has organized a group from the law firm of Foster Graham Milstein and Calisher to participate. "It's a really good team-

building exercise."

But it's no stroll in the park.

A week ago, Striker sat in his office, within sight of Republic Plaza. "I can see right where I'll lose the air in my lungs about the 25th floor," he said.

That would be three floors shy of the halfway point.

Ascent times vary, of course, but they range from under five minutes to a half-hour. Participants, who set off in staggered waves, take elevators back down. Some will arrive at the bottom and repeat the trip.

Two trips, 112 stories total

Mike McBride is one of them. This year, like last year, he plans on doing two cycles for a 112-story total.

Not bad for someone who must use an oxygen tank just to go to the grocery store. McBride was diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease in 2005.

"I have to carry my oxygen with me on my back during the event," said McBride, a paralegal. "My lung condition is severe enough that I have to use a high-flow

tank."

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A fitness class at Bonza Bodies at 1800 Glenarm trains for the stair climb at Republic Plaza on Sunday. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

He gets a lot of satisfaction from the event.

"When I was diagnosed, the doctors said the only thing to keep my disease in check is exercise," McBride said.

He has walked in eight full marathons, including the granddaddy in Boston, and climbed the 100-story John Hancock Center in Chicago.

McBride has some advice for newbies.

"It's all about pace," he said. "Most people start out too fast. They get to the 10th floor and are winded. I start out extra slow and speed up when my heart rate goes up."

Stair climbing is usually done to prep for tackling a 14er, so traditionally there has been a bit of irony in folks training for something that is usually performed as a training exercise itself.

But competitive stair climbing is a growing sport in some cities, although Denver doesn't seem to be one of them. The Empire State Building in Manhattan has hosted an annual dash to its observation deck since 1978. Chicago has the Hustle Up the Hancock.

And in Radebeul, Germany, there's a 39,799-step, 100-lap screamer designed to approximate a sea level-to- summit ascent of Mount Everest, minus the ice axes and avalanches.

Jamie Atlas, owner-trainer at Bonza Bodies at 1800 Glenarm Place, can vouch for the stamina needed in stair climbing. This year he's leading another team for the Republic Plaza event.

"There's an awesome sense of community it gave us last year," he said. "There's something primal about being in



Mike McBride, who has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, takes 62 flights of stairs on a training session. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

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the staircase. It's just you and the steps. It's a challenge."

Atlas has trained his team with a group of exercises that include squats, lunges, step-ups on benches and the like.

Of course, there's no substitute for straight-out stair climbing. In good weather, Atlas' team runs the steps at Red Rocks Amphitheatre. Cruddier days find them using the 14 flights in the office building housing his gym.

"It's hard," Atlas said. "Unlike running on a flat surface there's no downstroke. Your legs say 'Keep going,' but your lungs say, 'No thanks.'"

Colorado's Fight For Air Climb, one of more than 50 in cities nationwide, was held its first two years at the Wells Fargo Center ("the cash-register building"), a few blocks away from Republic Plaza at 370 17th St.

"This is a big deal for us," said Liz Toohey, special events manager for the American Lung Association in Colorado. "There are more than 50 American Lung Association stair climbs across the country, and last year, our climb had the most participants of any climb — a title we are hoping to keep this year."

Returning climbers

Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield is the climb's main sponsor.

Wendy Wiedenbeck is returning for this year's

event.

An employee of Encana Natural Gas, she typically has 80 people on her team. They raised \$18,000 in 2010, including a 100 percent match from her company.

"The first time I did the climb, I didn't think I'd survive," said Wiedenbeck, a warm-weather runner making her fourth climb Sunday. "But last year I shaved nine minutes off my time."

At the event, there's a message board you can sign and explain why you're participating. Wiedenbeck has several reasons, including a sister-in-law and a colleague lost to lung cancer, and two children who have wrestled with respiratory problems.

"It's just a fun event and lets me give back to an organization that has touched my life," she said.

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Up for participating in the 2011 Fight for Air Climb?

Online registration is open until 10 a.m. Thursday. Registration on Sunday is available for \$40, provided the \$56 fundraising minimum has been met. (That's a buck per floor.)

All participants must meet the minimum in order to participate in the event. Register at fightforairclimb.org.

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