



Barbara Hillary

By MEGHAN BARR, Associated Press Writer Sun May 6, 2:15 PM ET

NEW YORK - The bone-numbing trek to the North Pole is riddled with enough perils to make a seasoned explorer quake: Frostbite threatens, polar bears loom and the ice is constantly shifting beneath frozen feet.

But Barbara Hillary took it all in stride, completing the trek to the world's northernmost point last month at the age of 75. She is one of the oldest people to reach the North Pole, and is believed to be the first black woman on record to accomplish the feat.

Hillary, of Averne, N.Y., grew up in Harlem and devoted herself to a nursing career and community activism. At 67 and during retirement, she battled lung cancer. Five years later, she went dog sledding in Quebec and photographed polar bears in Manitoba.

Then she heard that a black woman had never made it to the North Pole.

"I said, 'What's wrong with this picture?'" she said. "So I sort of rolled into this, shall we say."

In 1909, Matthew Henson made history as the first black man to reach the Pole, though his accomplishment was not officially recognized for decades — it was overshadowed by the presence of his white colleague, Robert Peary.

Ann Bancroft, a physical education teacher from Minnesota, was the North Pole's first female visitor in 1986 as a member of the Steger Polar Expedition, which arrived unassisted in a re-creation of the 1909 trip. Various scientific organizations said no record exists of a black woman matching Bancroft's feat, although such record-keeping is not perfect.

"It's not like there's a guest book when you get up there and you sign it," said Robert Russell, founder of Eagles Cry Adventures, Inc., the travel company that leads thrill-seekers like Hillary to the farthest corners of the globe. Russell conducted six months' worth of research, interviewing fellow polar expedition contractors and digging through history books, but failed to find a black woman who had completed the trek.

Russell's paying customers can travel to the North Pole in various ways, from 18-day cross-country ski trips to simply being dropped off at the Pole via helicopter. The trip costs about \$21,000 per person.

Hillary insisted on skiing. Only trouble was, she had never been on the slopes before.

"It wasn't a popular sport in Harlem," she quipped.

So she enrolled in cross-country skiing lessons and hired a personal trainer, who finally determined she was physically fit for the voyage.

"She's a headstrong woman. You don't tell her 'no' about too many things," Russell said.

Her lack of funds didn't stop her, either. Hillary scraped together thousands of dollars and solicited private donors. On April 18, she arrived in Longyearben, Norway, where it is common for people to carry guns to ward off hungry polar bears.

"Before I arrived, the word was out that soul food was coming," she joked.

The travelers were then flown to the base camp — which is rebuilt each year due to melting ice — and pitched their tents. On April 23 Hillary set off on skis with two trained guides. Russell, fearing for her health, had convinced her to take the daylong ski route to the Pole in lieu of the longer trips.

As the sunlight glinted off the ice, distorting her gaze, Hillary struggled beneath a load of gear and pressed on. In her euphoria at reaching the Pole, she forgot the cold and removed her gloves, causing her fingers to become frostbitten.

Standing at the top of the world, she could have cared less. The enormous expanse of ice and sky left Hillary, for once in her long life, speechless.

While such expeditions serve as major accomplishments, some historians and Arctic experts criticize what they call an over-hyping of being the "first" to do something.

"The same issue is in effect for the climbing of

[Mount Everest](#)," said Michael Robinson, a University of Hartford professor who wrote "The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture." "You see the first diabetic, the first blind person to climb Everest. I'd hate for there to be a constant emphasis on nationality and race and gender, or disability."

But for Hillary, the achievement extends beyond race. She hopes her journey will inspire hope in other cancer survivors. With her feet back on dry land in New York, she is already plotting a new adventure: that of a global-warming activist.

"What if?" she said. "I'd like to go and lecture to different groups on what they can do on a grass-roots level (to fight global warming)."