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Made it! Trekkers touch bottom

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A group of Hamilton-area adventurers arrived at the South Pole at 2:20 p.m. yesterday, battling high altitude, the stress of pulling sleds and windchill temperatures of about -45.

The men left earlier this month under the South Pole Expedition for Kids banner (southpoleforkids.ca). One member, Mark MacLennan, had to be airlifted out and is recovering from frostbite in a hotel in Punta Arenas, Chile.

Yesterday, the four-person team huddled in tents a short walk to the geographic South Pole beside two buildings: an old science station, like something out of Expo '67, and a very expensive new science site.

"Please trust me, there is not much tourism at the South Pole," Peter Turkstra said by satellite phone of their arrival. "It is the most inhospitable place on Earth."

Turkstra, who arrived at the pole on his 44th birthday, is president of Turkstra Lumber. He is also dad to Sarah and Laura, and husband to Karen -- a Hamilton public school board trustee whom he called during a board meeting last night.

She put him on speaker phone for colleagues at 100 Main St. W.

"We went to the North Pole in 2006," he said, but this trip is more gruelling. To compare, he said the North Pole had open water and was not as cold. The South Pole had snow that made it feel as if he was pulling kids in a toboggan all day.

Turkstra is there with Steve Stipsits, Fred Losani and guide Doug Stoup.

They are struggling to eat enough calories: they burn 10,000 calories a day trying to stay warm, they can only eat about 4,000 calories a day and the effective altitude of 12,000 feet kills the appetite.

The adventurers, who skied 200 km to the South Pole to raise money for schools and local children's charities, are dependent on the weather. They need a seven-hour Twin Otter flight back to Patriot Hills, an outpost for polar flights. This requires good weather at three refuelling sites.

As the men skied into the Pole, they were welcomed by staff from the National Science Foundation, a U.S. federal agency. They got a tour of the facilities. All were exhausted.

"Our plan now is to contact our families because, when you are in a situation like this, under so much strain mentally and physically, all you think about are your families," said Turkstra.

The team plans a celebration dinner -- with MacLennan, whom they embrace as a full expedition member -- when they get back to Chile. Their original plan calls for a return to North America on Dec. 19.

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Courtesy South Pole Expedition for Kids

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