

Women that rock: Program offers community and safety to climbers

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They seemed to scamper up the climbing wall as easily as spiders, gliding from foothold to handhold, eyes trained on the color-coded route.

The four exchange students from Seoul, South Korea, dropped in to St. Cloud State University's Student Recreation Center on a recent Thursday evening during Women That Rock. For two hours every other week during the school year, the wall is reserved for the women-only event, which is open to community members.

Feet planted firmly on the rubberized tile, two Outdoor Endeavors staff members served as belayers, maintaining tension in the climbing ropes. Occasionally, when a climber seemed to reach an impasse, staff members doubled as cheerleaders.

"It is impossible," Jiyun Yoo, 22, a junior English education major, wailed from her spot near an arch.

"It is not impossible. That's what you said about the last one," said Lacey Block, 23, a senior elective studies major from Denver. "Just let go. You've got to let go. Just let go, sister, take your hands off. Grab your rope."

Yoo, who had scaled other parts of the wall and who drew applause for overcoming a tricky spot during the ascent, seemed stuck, unable to let go of the holds and begin the descent. To the casual observer, panic seemed imminent. Block seemed unfazed, offering encouragement. Yoo's friends looked on, laughing. Eventually, Yoo grabbed the rope, swung out from the 30-foot-tall wall and rappelled down.

"It's for any skill level, so if you're new to rock climbing, we'll encourage you. Everyone's supportive, so it's kind of fun," said Kay Printy, 20, a senior anthropology major from Milaca. The climbing wall student manager, she was belaying with Block on this Thursday night.

Comfort in commonality

Organizers and climbers said women might be more likely to try the sport in an all-female setting. Angie Ahrendt, 23, a senior ecology and field biology major who works at Outdoor Endeavors and plays for the Twin Cities Amazon Rugby team, called Women That Rock a safe zone that encourages people to try a different sport.

"When you come up with gender-specific programs, it's not the answer to everything. But it encourages more women to do it," said Ivan Bartha, coordinator for experiential programs at Outdoor Endeavors. "For the longest time, the stereotype was the bearded man with the fleece jacket (and) Birkenstocks."

People are more likely to try something if they see participants who look like them, Bartha said, adding that the number of women participating in outdoor adventure programs has increased dramatically since he entered the profession in 1989.

While Ahrendt grew up camping, biking and playing sports -- "My parents hate that I play rugby. They just think that it's too rough," she said. -- climbing was something she picked up later. Part of her job at Outdoor Endeavors is letting people know what opportunities are available.

Research The Outdoor Foundation collected in 2010 showed 44 percent of those who participated in outdoor activities were female. The 2011 Outdoor Recreation Participation Report was based on a survey of more than 38,700 households and individuals 6 and older.

The study found almost 4.8 million Americans participated in indoor climbing, sport climbing and bouldering (climbing on large rocks or small cliffs) in 2010.

"People go from climbing gyms to rock and ice," said David Brown, executive director of the American Outdoors Association, a Knoxville, Tenn.-based outfitters and guides' trade association.

Focus on success

Block and Printy, who have climbed rocks indoors and out, said a common misconception about the sport is that it requires a great deal of upper-body strength. They agreed with other climbers who said the activity is accessible to a wide range of ages and fitness levels.

"The sport of rock climbing has been dominated by males for years. It's something for women to do if they're interested in trying climbing," Ahrendt said by telephone. "Women are generally more technically sound with it because women will use their legs more to climb, which is what you should do."

Jane Olsen -- director of St. Cloud State's University Women's Center, which has co-sponsored the program since it started about six years ago -- said the female-only event allows participants to focus solely on the sport.

"I believe that we currently live in a society where women always feel like they're being watched or rated or looked at for their physicality," said Olsen, who has been climbing on the wall about a dozen times - during Women That Rock events and with her son. "I feel like they can just try and be athletic rather than try to be cute."

Thursday's event drew the occasional male onlooker, who would peer into the climbing area from the second level. But the climbers focused on the wall and on each other.

"It's strength. It's balance. It's the mental aspect. It's as hard as you want to make it. That's why I like it so much. It's challenging," Printy said.

"It's like a puzzle," Block said.

At its peak, Bartha said Women That Rock drew as many as 40 people --including mother-daughter duos. Bartha said the weather often determines turnout. On this Thursday, six climbers showed up, all students.

Among them was Katherine Daugherty, 19, a sophomore bio-medical major from New London who shows up to climb almost every day -- sometimes with a friend.

"You're completely focused on the wall. It's about body movements. That's all you think about," Daugherty said. "It's not just the physical activity; it's a community."

IF YOU GO ...

What: Women That Rock.

When: 7-9 p.m. Thursday, April 26.

Where: Student Recreation Center, St. Cloud State University.

Cost: \$6, community members; free, SCSU students (optional shoe rental is extra).

Details: 308-3772; www.stcloudstate.edu/campusrec

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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