

Reaching New Heights

A rookie climber finds she's up to the challenge | BY JESSICA J. HILL

A couple of years ago, I decided to celebrate my 26th birthday by getting out of my comfort zone. I booked an excursion to climb a mountain in Southeast Asia, where I was teaching English to high school students.

I ascended with shaking legs, but I knew I wanted to finish. I was going to finish. I had to finish—to prove to myself I could. Suddenly, I wasn't doing this so I'd have a good story to tell my family and friends back home. I was doing it for me.

And so I climbed. My body was weary, but my mind was determined. I made it to the top and let out a loud “Woohoo!” I felt like I could do anything.

Still, I thought climbing would be a one-time adventure, something to check off my bucket list. Then I returned to my hometown of Condon in north-central Oregon for a visit, and a friend invited me to climb with him at Smith Rock State Park near Bend. I'd hiked there, so I was familiar with its dramatic rock formations, and I knew it was one of our nation's top climbing locales. I was intrigued.

Smith Rock is known for having some great routes for beginners, but I was soon feeling challenged. The handholds were less defined than I expected, and my feet had to do a lot of the work. “Trust your shoes!” my friend shouted from the ground as he belayed me.

Once again, I was determined not to give up. It was just me and the wall. At the crux—climber speak for the most arduous portion of a climb—I dug the toes of my shoes into the rock, with my right knee bent near my chest, and leaned in with my hands, ready to grab what I hoped was a secure hold above. It took everything I had.

My friend seemed surprised I made it to the top, but I wasn't. The view was worth every drop of sweat, the feeling of accomplishment unrivaled as I gazed down at the Crooked River, carving its way through tuff and basalt, and then looked out at the juniper-dotted high desert plateau surrounding the rock and the river. My spirits were almost as high as the peaks in the Cascade Range I could see rising to the west.

Last year, I moved to Fort Collins, Colorado, to study for a master's degree at Colorado State. On a whim, some of my classmates created a group that met to practice on the university's climbing

wall, and I joined, thinking that perhaps I could find a cohort of adventurers with whom to enjoy my burgeoning passion for higher elevations. After several sessions at school, four of us drove 20 miles through the winding Poudre Canyon, parked at a pullout, packed our climbing shoes and gear in our backpacks, and waded across the nearly hip-deep Cache la Poudre River, a body of water created from snowmelt in the Rockies but placid enough in early September to safely cross in the warmth of a sunny day.

On the other side of the 15-foot crossing, we wound along a creek and up a steep, rocky incline to the base of The Palace—a combination of granite, gneiss and schist rising from the hills along the river basin. My first climb in Colorado's outdoors was also to be my most difficult ascent yet, a step up from novice.

The Poudre Canyon rock felt rougher under my hands than the rocks in Southeast Asia and Oregon, and seemed easier to navigate than the wall at school. My shoes clung to the cliff face with a security I didn't believe was possible. My body felt strong and ready. With just a little training, I had increased my capability and my confidence.

I breezed to the top and looked out over the tips of the jagged edges surrounding me, heard the river roaring below, and my dog, 40 feet down, yelping and whining because he'd thought we were going for a hike, and I'd gone up without him.

I've come to realize over many additional ascents that it's a personal challenge every time I clip in. There are so many variations of rock to climb, from limestone to granite, each presenting new and different demands.

When I'm on the wall, I feel alone and single-minded, contemplating every move, checking in with myself; mind and body must work together. But once at the top, I know I didn't make it there alone. My team provided ongoing encouragement from below. My belayer was prepared to stop me if I fell.

The members of this climbing group are now my friends, my support, my inspiration. Climbing brings me closer to people and nature, and it allows me to see my own backyard with a traveler's pair of eyes: Each trip to the top is a new and exciting—and rewarding—journey.

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