



# On The Rocks -

## Using the Great Outdoors for Therapy

*Katie Fiegen, 18, is all smiles after reaching the top of the mountain.*

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Extreme sports have become a national phenomenon in America. At the same time, experiential education has become a new way to teach and transfer skills in nontraditional or natural settings. To combine this type of learning with the physical challenge of an extreme sport, the Recreation Therapy and Physical Therapy Departments of Shriners Hospital in Chicago designed a program for adolescent amputees involving rock climbing in the Mississippi Palisades State Park in Southwest Illinois with a group of peers. The primary goal: to teach the young amputees about their personal limits and how to overcome them.

The purpose of the trip was to challenge participants to safely step outside their comfort zones, to learn to problem solve in a community setting, and to explore their physical and mental abilities. These goals were attained through a new leisure activity, which combined aspects of both physical and recreational therapy.

The clinical team included an orthopedic physician, a nurse, a physical therapist, prosthetists, and a recreational therapist. Participants were selected from patients in the Prosthetic Clinic at Shriners Hospital. To qualify, the eight participants had to be between 12 and 18 years old, independent in self-care, have parental support, and have an interest in participating in the program.

It was important for unity that the group be equal - four boys and four girls - and, to promote a sense of belonging and self-esteem, that all the members have the same disability. By controlling the size of the group, therapists could better focus on and help participants with their specific needs and goals.

Included in the 2002 group were two youngsters with bilateral knee disarticulations, one with a wrist disarticulation and a below-knee amputation, two below-knee amputees, one above-knee amputee and one participant who wears a nonstandard above-knee prosthesis.

The original one-day program was expanded to include an overnight camping trip to provide team-building activities for the participants. Trust

was identified as a major component of rock climbing and to foster such an environment, group games and icebreakers were introduced the day before the actual rock climb. Our goal was not only for the participants to develop physical skills, but to be able to process the emotions of the experience in a way that would be useful if this was a one-time outdoor experience.

Debriefing or “processing” the experience pre- and post-activity became an integral part of the process. Identifying goals and expressing feelings before, during and after allowed participants to transfer the experience to other areas of their lives. An example

of this learning took place when one of the younger participants stated that he learned that “No matter how hard something is, if I keep trying, I can do it!”

Another older participant was able to identify her upcoming trip to college as “scary,” much like her first steps on the rock climb. After experiencing her personal goal of reaching the top of the mountain, she was able to relate the challenge and experience of rock climbing to going away to college. After the climb, she had expanded her ability to problem solve, rely on others and trust a support system - skills that are also necessary to leave home.

Power Adventures, an outdoor adventure company, was hired to set up the campsites, instruct and lead the actual climbs. The therapists worked closely with Power Adventures to create a program that was safe, yet physically, mentally and emotionally challenging for the staff as well as the adolescents. The staff of Power Adventures had not previously worked with amputees and was initially unsure of the potential of the program. By the end, they were amazed and encouraged by the ability of the participants and eager to assist more amputees in reaching their goals in outdoor adventures.

For the youngsters, the experience was encouraging. As participant Katie Fiegen said, “I learned so much. I got the chance to meet others kids facing the same challenges I was, and I learned a lot about myself and others (determination and inner strength) all at the same time. It was fantastic!”



*Jasmine Washington, 12, gives a thumbs up as she makes it up the rock, her fifth climb of the day.*



*Vivek Patel, 10, searches the rock for the perfect climbing spot while others discuss their next possible climb.*

While not every participant reached the top of the mountain, all were successful. For some, the challenge was putting on the safety equipment and agreeing to try a climb. For others, the challenge was to climb each of the ropes at least once. In addition to celebrating individual achievements, the participants cheered the achievements of their peers. For most of the participants, these two days were the most time they had spent with other amputees. The participants networked with each other and the older participants became mentors to the younger. All shared their life experiences, defeats and triumphs.

After the trip, parents commented on what their children had gained from the experience. The most frequent comment concerned their increased confidence in their physical ability. Surprisingly, social confidence and the ability to make new friends independently was listed many times and deemed most important by the parents. The overnight rock climbing trip that was conceived to provide a unique challenge in an outdoor setting had evolved into a multifaceted program, addressing not only physical but emotional skills. With the ability to enhance self-esteem, develop advanced problem-solving skills and challenge the physical ability of participants, rock climbing is a recreational activity that allows participants to enhance their lives in a variety of ways. The program has also provided resources and connections to community recreation, something that people with disabilities often find difficult to access. And the program has also increased awareness of more progressive treatment options available for adolescents who have made the transition from the hospital through rehabilitation and are independently functioning in the community. Creating new and challenging programs for our clients helps keep the Shriners Hospital for Children in Chicago a climb above the rest. ■

*For more information or questions on the Shriners Hospital rock climbing therapy program, contact Melanie Bland, CCLS, CTRS, child life specialist, recreation therapist, Shriners Hospital, Chicago, Illinois, at [MBland@shrinenet.org](mailto:MBland@shrinenet.org) or call 773/385-5588.*