

COLLEGIATE TIMES

New climbing walls come to area

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A local business opening this weekend wants to take customers to new heights.

Crimper's Climbing, a rock climbing gym, will hold its grand opening on Saturday, April 14, is located in Christiansburg and will offer three climbing walls within ten minutes of Virginia Tech.

This isn't the New River Valley's first indoor climbing facility, though. Dwelling Place Christian Fellowship, a Christiansburg church, used to host a gym called "the Rock" for its youth that was popular with local climbers. However, the church closed the gym approximately two years ago.

"I don't think that they were really trying to make money off of it and when they decided that it wasn't the best thing for their youth, that's when they got rid of it," said Katherine Marek, a senior mechanical engineering major and president of the VT Rock Climbing Club.

The void left by its departure was not left unnoticed, however. After experiencing a particularly rocky year in which he lost his job as a broadcast engineer, John Johnson decided in 2010 to earnestly pursue his dream of opening his own climbing gym.

"It was (a drastic change)," said Johnson. "My passion for climbing is what kept me going."

Beginning in December 2010, Johnson and his wife began planning for their potential future gym. As a Blacksburg native and a climber for 13 years, he knew there was a thriving local climbing and outdoors community. After seeing gyms like the Rock succeed, Johnson had confidence a marketed, well-planned gym could garner interest.

"I knew that there had been some small climbing gyms in the area that were extremely popular," Johnson said. "Bringing a commercial, full-scale gym was something that I (hoped) the community would get behind and really enjoy."

Nearly a year after initial plans, Johnson got a lease for a former gymnastics studio in Christiansburg, with construction on the 10,000 square foot facility beginning in January 2011.

The construction involved Timy Fairfield, a member of the United States national climbing team for over a decade. Fairfield worked with Johnson to design Crimper's 40,000 square feet of climbing space at an expense of \$122,000.

Fairfield, also the president of Futurist Climbing Consultants, helped design the gym's the bouldering wall, its signature feature. Bouldering, a type of rock climbing undertaken without a rope, is practiced on short walls over a mat to prevent injury from falls.

"Bouldering is definitely harder to start out getting into because it's a harder type of climbing," said Browning Gentry, a junior majoring in industrial and systems engineering.

This degree of difficulty makes indoor bouldering walls so useful for practice-and so popular among climber looking for a challenge. However, the pair was determined to rise above the competition and build a 16-foot-by-70-foot wall.

“Our goal was to always make it a national-level or world-level facility,” Johnson said.

Matt Londrey, a junior animal and poultry science major and vice president of the VT Rock Climbing Club, said the 16-foot high wall is unique among gyms.

“The bouldering wall is one of the tallest that I’ve been on,” said Londrey. “Most of the tallest bouldering walls are like 12 feet.”

Height is not the only thing differentiating the wall. Fairfield drew upon his experience of designing climbing routes at the X-Games to construct a wall with a striking aesthetic design. On the left side of the wall, an outcropping in the shape of a wave juxtaposes a similar shape in the shape of a ship’s prow.

“We wanted something that evolved as you go laterally across the panorama and offered a water element to the space,” said Fairfield. “It’s very much inspired by a boat coming out of a wave.”

Some climbers have noted there is no texture on the wall. However, the unnatural feel is part of Fairfield’s plan.

“We’re moving away from trying to build fake rock; we’re moving toward minimalist and modernist design,” Fairfield said. “It’s a design aesthetic that is different than others, but generally some of the newer gyms are moving to a smooth look.”

The outcroppings on the wall offer unique opportunities. The middle of the prow contains sections where climbers must hug and compress in order to advance, while both features allow for more technical moves like slinging.

Although the aesthetic of the wall looks distinctly artificial, climbers like Marek found the features to be useful in preparing for outdoor climbing.

“[The boat shape] makes things more realistic to what you’d see outside,” Marek said. “Most people use a climbing gym to train for climbing outside. Having features like that instead of just a flat wall makes it a lot better to train.”

Contrastingly, the right side of the bouldering wall is flat, which Fairfield says allows for smaller holds and slower, more technical climbing. Also, each handhold is movable, letting Johnson adjust and change routes periodically.

“One of the great things about this gym is that once you solve one challenge, there’s another one,” Johnson said. “In a couple more weeks, if you’ve done all the things that are a challenge for you, we’ll change all that; there will always be something fresh.”

So far, climbers have responded positively to the challenge of Crimper’s. Before its grand opening, the gym has attracted around 100 members, including Derek Aegerter, a junior majoring in mechanical engineering.

“The nearest climbing place outdoors is about an hour away, so now we have a place to come and just climb,” said Aegerter. “I just love how close it is.”

Johnson plans to work with Virginia Tech's Venture Out, Radford University's Radford Outdoors and both the Montgomery County and Blacksburg recreational departments to incorporate more programs. Dave Goodman, Venture Out coordinator, said he looks forward to have trips to the gym next fall and winter.

"It's going to be a local climbing crag which we haven't had in quite a while and it's going to be a great opportunity for the local community and students to get out and climb, especially in the winter when they can't get outside," said Goodman.

The master plan for the gym also includes options for future growth. Fairfield said designs have already been drafted for second or third phases of the facility.

With a growing collection of members and options for the future, the only direction for Crimper's Climbing to go is up.

"The future of Crimper's is huge," Johnson said. "I'd like to see Crimper's become the center of the climbing community in this area."

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