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Women's climbing group forms national network

By Jennifer Karchmer
Poughkeepsie Journal

Bonnie Prudden's passion with rock climbing began in the 1940s at Ulster County's Shawangunk mountains, known as the Gunks. She was one of only a handful of women who climbed alongside men making first ascents of rock that had never been explored.



Darryl Bautista/Poughkeepsie Journal

Veteran climbers Alex Baer, left, and Julie Seyfert-Lillis, shown Tuesday at Mohonk Preserve, are two of the few female New York State licensed rock climbing guides in the Shawangunk Ridge.

"There were no styles. We always just climbed. We were pioneers," she said during a phone interview Aug. 10 from her home in Tucson, Ariz. "In those days, we had lousy shoes, a rope, a few pitons and a hammer."

As a rock climbing trailblazer, Prudden climbed with the likes of Hans Kraus, Ken Prestrud, Fritz Weissner and her husband Richard Hirschland. After the group tackled ascents for the first time, they gave names to the routes, like "Bonnie's Roof" or "Ken's Crack."

Prudden, 88, a nationally-known exercise guru and author of 22 books, will return to the Gunks Oct. 5 as the keynote speaker of the sixth annual sheclimbs, Inc. gathering at the Tuthilltown Gristmill, known as Bunks in the Gunks, located in Gardiner. The four-day event from Oct. 3-6 includes climbing clinics, a writing workshop, yoga and stretch classes and a group dinner. Prudden's slide show presentation is open to the public.

A grassroots non-profit volunteer group, sheclimbs, Inc., started with 25 women in Portland, Ore., who were searching for women climbing partners. Today, the group is 300 members strong with 18 chapters nationwide.

The sheclimbs annual gathering is held at top-notch climbing venues across the country, so choosing the Gunks for this year's setting was a natural, according to sheclimbs president Carolyn McHale.

Past gatherings have been held in Smith Rocks, Wash.; City of Rocks, Idaho; Boulder, Colo.; New River Gorge, W.Va., and Squamish, British Columbia.

Women's self-reliance

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Like many women, Salt Point's Alice Velky started climbing with a male partner, but after a breakup, sought out female partners on the sheclimbs Web site.

"When you climb with guys, they tend to take over," said Velky, the Gunks chapter coordinator and organizer of this year's gathering. "Sheclimbs is all about supporting women's self-reliance on the rock."

And for a sport that newcomers think is all about arm strength -- flexibility and coordination are really the key, climbing veterans say.

"We think women are better climbers," said Jon Ross, who runs High Angle Adventures, Inc. guide service in the Gunks. "It's more about grace and technique than about power. Women more often look to their footwork and balance."

And in the past few years especially, companies which sell climbing equipment are marketing harnesses and shoes specifically for women, according to Jeremy Rice, a professional climber for 10 years who works at Rock & Snow in New Paltz.

Alex Baer, a New York State licensed rock climbing guide and sheclimbs member, started on the rocks when she was 9 learning from her father and grandfather who climbed routes in Europe.

"This community is fantastic," said Baer, 37. "I've climbed and lived in many places and it's a very supportive community especially supportive of women climbing."

Julie Seyfert-Lillis, 35, also a licensed rock climbing guide, will lead a sheclimbs clinic tackling overhangs, features the Gunks are known for. "I really enjoy giving women the tools do this. It's awesome," she said.

At 88, climbing pioneer Prudden shows no signs of slowing down her fitness regimen. Her home in Tucson is equipped with a balance beam, a stair machine and other exercise equipment. She spends an hour a day in the pool too.

"If I gave into old age, I'd be sitting in a chair," she said.

IF YOU GO

SHECLIMBS GATHERING

What: Sixth annual she-climbs, Inc., Gathering, Bonnie Prudden slide show and presentation.

When: Oct. 5, 8 p.m.

Where: Tuthilltown Gristmill, Gardiner.

Information: Call (845) 255-1527.

Logging on: www.sheclimbs.org.

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