

POINTS OF VIEW

Reporter rises to the challenge of indoor rock

Like most people, there are times I just feel like climbing the walls.

And now, in Farmington at least, there is a sporting goods store where the employees and customers understand the feeling — literally.

That's because at Benchmark, on Grand River just east of downtown, there is a 16-foot wall, made of a composite material, that duplicates steep rock surfaces that challenge rock climbers. A modest imitation, true, but it's enough of the real thing that you have to be careful or you'll be embarrassed.

Observer photographer Sharon LeMieux and I saw several climbers in the hour or so that we spent in the store recently. Sure, there are more than 30 canoes, there are tents and other camping gear, kayaks, fly fishing equipment and just about everything else anyone interested in the great outdoors might like to try.

But that wall is an attraction, and challenge, that most sporting goods stores don't offer.

"Want to try it?" asked Wes Karczynski, with a look that said, "you know you're gonna like it."

And after the first rough attempt, complete with a safety rope and Karczynski, a climber for the past six years, on the other end, the memory of a special feeling came back to me.

Like most kids, even in the relatively flat Midwest, I'd found hills and rocks to climb in my youth. In my 20s I did some trekking in New Zealand. And even last summer, my wife, our 3-year-old daughter and I climbed some impressive trails in Ireland.

But this reminded me more of a visit with friends in British Columbia when I was 17.

Near the Pacific coast, these Rocky mountains were modest by most standards (in the 4,000-foot range), but they were treacherous enough where you had to be careful (during my visit a local 15-year-old boy fell to his death).

When my friend Hans pointed the way, across a lone, not too broad, fallen tree as the only path across white-water rapids to continue our trail, the thought occurred to me that one slip could be fatal.

But crossing proved to be both exciting and satisfying. And that's the feeling I had climbing up the wall at Benchmark.

And although I now carry a heavier load with less youthful limbs, a feeling of accomplishment and the humility that comes when I finally couldn't reach the next small ledge were still there.

Wes, who demonstrated some tricks of the trade as he effortlessly swung up the wall, then asked me if I'd like to try again, this time up to where the wall juts out.

"Gotcha!" his expression seemed to say.

I was hooked on the idea and went up for a third time. But there came a point where I could go no further. My fingers, clutching hard, were giving way when Wes told me to reach up to the next ledge. I tried, but couldn't reach far enough and ended up literally losing my grip. The rope held and I was gently lowered to the mat — but not in defeat.

With proper equipment, a partner you trust and some caution, rock climbing can be safe. But, just like my experience at 17, there is a risk.

Perhaps it's no greater than when we get behind the wheel of a car.

"If you drive a certain way, driving is safe," Wes said. "But if you don't, it can be very dangerous. It's the same for rock climbing."

Well, yes and no.

Probably we take for granted our safety when we drive even if we shouldn't. Do rock climbers ever get so used to it that they take their safety for granted? Hard to say.

"One of my bad habits is to call out 'I'm falling' before I have to," Wes said.

That's a conservatism that I could live with. And at Benchmark, they'll give you free classes and let you practice as much as you want before you attempt the real thing.

The expertise varies considerably, from the two college students we saw who had just taken their first class two weeks before to climbers who, Wes said, can climb up and down that wall without even using their feet.

Karczynski has climbed some of this country's more famous sites, like Yosemite, Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons. But for most, he recommends something closer to home to start.

And before I tackle El Capitan, perhaps I'll take a few lessons and climb the walls a few times — and enjoy the feeling.



Hanging around: Reporter Bill Coutant, outfitted for mountain climbing, tries his hand on the Benchmark's artificial rock.

SHARON LEMIEUX/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Chief justice fills us in on doings of circuit court

I hope to share with you information about Oakland Circuit Court — our accomplishments, our innovations, and the work that we do, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

First, case filings. In 1992, the most recent year for which I have statewide figures, each of my colleagues and I averaged 1,900 new cases. The state average for circuit judges is 1,146. So each of us in Oakland County starts off with 750 more cases than the other circuit judges in the state. That means that each of us must dispose of 74 cases every day just to keep even.

One of my newer colleagues was recently so pleased to have disposed of seven cases in one day — until I reminded him that seven dispositions almost kept up with the number of new cases that were filed that day! It reminds me of what the Red Queen said to Alice in "Through the Looking Glass": "Here you must run twice as fast as you possibly can just to stay where you are."

Let me illustrate the magnitude of our case filings from another perspective. According to information from the state Court Administrative Office, we would need 11 additional judges to bring the Oakland Circuit Court to parity with the state's filing average. Consequently even in this time of budget constraints, we consider our recent request for two additional judges to be quite modest and altogether justified.

We also handle more of the kinds of cases that require what I call substantial "judge time." Each of my colleagues and I average 390 new divorce cases per year compared to the state average of 260.

Some among you may not be aware but the circuit court sits as an appellate court for cases appealed from lower courts and administrative agencies and tribunals throughout the county. Each Oakland Circuit judge averages 140 appeals from district courts, Probate Court, and state administrative agencies. Compare this to the state average of only 50 appeals per judge.

Our general civil docket is also heavy. This docket includes medical malpractice cases, contract disputes, personal injury cases, cases arising from automobile accidents and product liabilities cases, just to name a few. Each Oakland Circuit judge gets 380 civil cases on an average while the other circuit judges in the state get substantially less than half that number —

GUEST COLUMNIST



JUDGE HILDA GAGE

only 149.

The criminal cases consume the most judge time. Each Oakland Circuit judge averages 525 new criminal cases per year. The statewide average is 288 new criminal cases per judge. Capital felonies, those which carry a possible life sentence, frequently go to trial. That's simply the nature of these kinds of cases. Nine percent of all capital cases in the entire state are handled right here in Oakland County. Non-capital felonies account for 26 percent of the new cases filed in this court.

We do get some assistance on our criminal caseload from our "drug judge." This judge is funded largely by a grant we were awarded through the Office of Drug Control Policy. Fifteen percent of all felony cases filed in our court are drug cases and almost without exception these are handled exclusively by our "drug judge."

Nevertheless, our entire criminal caseload is staggering. This court ranks first in the state for jury verdicts per judge. We average 33 criminal jury verdicts per judge per year compared to the statewide average of 18.

This is due in part to legislatively imposed mandatory sentencing on specified cases — such as life sentences without parole on major drug cases — as well as our prosecutor's no plea bargain policy. Although the judiciary is a separate branch of government, the decisions of the other branches have a significant influence on our workload.

Hilda Gage is chief justice of the Oakland Circuit Court. This is part of a "State of the Court" address she gave recently to the Oakland County Board of Commissioners. Next week, she will cover the court's advances and concerns.

Your SPRING Project Experts

Build-It-Yourself Garage Package

Textured Panel Siding Included in Every Package!

2x4 studs, 16" O.C., 2x6 rafters and cross ties, 1-3030 window, white pine trim, collar ties, shingles, 2" overhang on front and 6" on sides.

Priced from \$1995

WOLMANIZED

Handy Mans Wood 'N' Barn Kits

8'x8' No Floor. Includes pie-cut "rib trusses," shingles, textured panel siding. All trim, plates and nails. Installation Available • Many Additional Sizes!

Barn Style

\$329 #4230697

Salt Box

\$449 #4230687

Gable Style

\$489 #4230666

15% OFF TREATED LUMBER

• Great For Decks • Fences
• Decks or Any Other Outdoor Projects
• We stock top quality ponderosa pine

Mans Treated Lumber Policy is to make sure you are completely satisfied. If at any time Prior to Cutting or Nailing any treated board, you are not satisfied with the condition of that board, you may return it! No Questions Asked!

CANTON - Do-It Center
41900 Ford Road, Canton, MI 48104
313-981-5800

N.A. Mans HOME DESIGN CENTER
41900 Ford Road, Canton, MI 48104
Windows & Doors 313-981-4465
Kitchen & Bath Showroom 313-981-5800
Creative Floors 313-981-3582

MONROE
2734 N. Monroe St., Monroe, MI 48136
313-241-8400

NEW BOSTON
36500 Sibley Road, New Boston, MI 48134
313-753-9366 OR 313-941-3131

TRENTON
3300 W. Jefferson, Trenton, MI 48134
313-476-3000