

Women who climb

Jocelyn Cohen

AS A KID, I CLIMBED trees. By the time I was four years old, the large Chinese elm in our back yard had become my sanctuary. The trees were inviting, and like most kids, it was just natural to climb in them. We lived on the edge of a swampy area, thick with trees along its deeply forested edges.

About 12 years ago, I realized that I really wanted to climb trees professionally. I was a Certified Arborist and most of my work involved pruning ornamental trees and shrubs, providing horticulture advice, and preparing tree protection reports. Most of the trees were under 15 feet tall and could be pruned from the ground. Occasionally, though, I did some free-climbing, but even on small trees, I had to hang on for dear life with one hand, while using a saw in the other.

I knew there was a better way, so I started going to WCISA climbing workshops. Sometimes I was the only woman there. Nothing came easily for me – I lacked confidence and felt self-conscious. Somehow, I thought I had to prove to every-

one that women could do this. How would it look if I didn't perform well? I felt on-edge, and struggled at it, and I just wasn't getting it the way I'd hoped. I lacked a role model. Furthermore, I didn't have any climbing buddies to practice with, to share information with, to look to for advice or support, or just to commiserate with. I knew some experienced climbers but no one to help and encourage me. I continued to attend workshops, but I just didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

About six years ago, I spoke with Chad Brey, an accomplished climber, at one of the climbing workshops. I mentioned that I was having problems, and he graciously offered to help. It was at that point that I realized I needed a climbing mentor,



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Bella Rammon guiding a beginning climber.



someone to 'show me the ropes'.

We met after work at his apartment, first going over climbing knots and trying out various saddles. He would hang a rope over a door and tell me to practice a particular climbing hitch until I could do it behind my back and with my eyes closed. He covered a number of topics clearly and took the time to explain things and to demonstrate, equipment, knots, climbing approaches, etc. He was patient and understanding: there was none of the stress or distractions that had hindered me at the workshops. For me, this made all the difference. Later, I asked him if

there was something I could do to return the favor, and he said, “yes, teach other women.”

This felt right! By then my climbing skills had greatly improved and I wanted to 'extend the rope' to other women as Chad did for me. I started asking around and before long there were four women interested in attending a workshop for women. We initially organized a four-day workshop. Chad taught and I assisted. I continued practicing with Chad. Meanwhile, a planning group started working on organizing the first WCISA climbing workshop expressly for women in 2016.

Is a women-only workshop really necessary? In an interview for *"The Northern Woodlands"* magazine 2012, Melissa LeVangie talks about her challenges getting into the field. "The more I learned, the more I was hungry to know." But as a woman applying for jobs in the male-dominated world of forestry, Melissa often met with resistance. Early on, the reaction she got from potential employers was "Oh, you're just a girl." She learned she had to prove herself physically to be taken seriously. She told them "just give me an hour [to show you what I can do]." That was usually all it took to prove her skill and get hired for the job."⁽¹⁾ When I asked Rhonda Wood, the Horticulture Manager at Disneyland about her experience, she commented that although her journey included great mentors "it also took a lot of tenacity and grit, along with persistence."

I've heard many accounts of bias from women colleagues who have faced stiff resistance when they tried to take on non-traditional roles. Some obviously succeeded while others were strongly discouraged or turned away — what a waste! I will offer some insights and reasoning why the women-only climbing workshops serve the interest of the industry and that of the entire chapter membership. It does this by encouraging women to join the profession in any capacity they prefer.

A short history of women in non-traditional fields

I've written about women's history for nearly 30 years. I know that women before us have done extraordinary things that have helped other women achieve their goals or potentials. Women have been largely denied the opportunity in most pursuits to compete with men on a level playing field. That's changing though. Nonetheless, the perception of what women think possible has affected their career choices. Women, historically, have been largely excluded or discriminated against in careers traditionally dominated by men. I



Participants at 3rd workshop, Hollywood Camp, LA.

make this comparison because tree work has, until more recently, been a male bastion. It's a unique profession, because it requires sound scientific knowledge of arboriculture, the balance and strength of a mountaineer or trapeze artist, the skill of a fine craftsman, the perseverance of a marathon runner, and the eye of an artist. All things many women excel at.

Here are a few examples of women's achievements. Although mountaineering is largely a male-dominated field, women have participated for centuries. In 1786, little more than ten years after what was considered the first recorded ascent of Mont Blanc, Europe's highest mountain, Marie Parminter climbed Le Buet (10,157 feet) in the Alps of Savoy in 1799. In 1808, Miss Paradis became the first woman to climb Mont Blanc. The first Alpine Club was formed in London in 1857 and as you might suspect, women were excluded from joining. Fifty years later, women formed their own Ladies Alpine Club.

As women were pushing for the right to vote, mountain climbing demonstrated that women were physically strong enough to participate

in turn-of-the-century politics and suggested these women had earned their right to vote through their labor on the mountain. It showed women as powerful, victorious, and capable of winning their upcoming suffrage campaign. (2)

In the article *The Mountaineering and Wilderness Rhetorics of Washington Woman Suffragists*, Tiffany Lewis recently wrote about the 1909 group of mountaineers who climbed Mount Rainier during the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition [and] placed a 'Votes for Women' pennant at the mountain summit. (3) For some mountaineering women, the wilderness was a metaphor for women's power.

In 1911 Annie Peck, a founding member of the American Alpine Club, climbed Coropuna (21,079 feet) in Peru, and waved a banner atop the summit reading 'Women's Vote'. Another American explorer, geographer, cyclist, hiker, and mountaineer Fanny Bullock Workman, while surveying glaciers on an expedition in the Karakoram, was photographed with a Votes for Women sign on Silver Throne, at 21,000 feet. Workman documented her travels in numerous books filled with comments, photos, and observations (4). She, like other

women, received negative sentiment for climbing, and criticism for wearing pants or bloomers rather than full-length skirts on their ascents.

In 1939, after a group of women from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, made the first female ascent of Owen-Spalding on the Grand Teton, the Salt Lake City Tribune reported, "Another successful invasion of the field of sport by the weaker sex." (5). It is hard to imagine how Margaret Smith Craighead, Margaret Bedell, Ann Sharples, and Mary Whittemore responded to this affront after their milestone achievement.

A bit of ISA history

The certification program planning began in 1983. When Denice Britton, past WCISA President completed her MS in Urban Forestry from UC Berkeley in 1982, she became the Statewide Urban Forestry Specialist for UC Cooperative Extension. While in that job, she was asked to spearhead the establishment of a certification program for arborists by Dr. Richard Harris (UC California, at Davis), Charles Mathias, then WCISA president, and other members of the WCISA board of directors. Denice recalls, "After a huge amount of work, we held the first exam in late 1983. There were a few women involved at that time — Nelda Matheny, Judy Thomas, and Denice, perhaps a few more. Of the first 100 arborists to become Certified Arborists, only two were women: Judy Thomas, who became one of the first community college female arborist instructors in CA, and Denice Britton, who is now a Consulting Arborist in Napa. Nelda Matheny, Managing Consultant, HortScience/Bartlett Consulting unaware at the time that consulting arborists could apply, took the exam the following year and became certified.

Women's climbing workshop: goals, aspirations, observations

When asked why women prefer the women-only climbing workshops, Rhonda summed it up this way:

"Women are more enthusiastic in the company of other women. There is a comfort level that's conducive to learning and lowering of one's guard. There is the realization that other women out there think like they do, and are working to gain acceptance and respect." August 2019 is the third year of the WCISA Women's Climbing Workshop. The first year, Julia Bartens, Regional Urban Forester for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) and Chair of WCISA's Women in Arboriculture committee, recruited two accomplished women climbers from the East Coast, Melissa and Bear LeVangie, twins who have been teaching women-only climbing classes for over a decade. The goal was to create a supportive, stress-free, and empowering learning environment for women to climb trees, with an emphasis on arboriculture. Julia also recruited Rhonda Wood, past WCISA president and Horticulture Manager at Disneyland. All three instructors, who worked together for the first time, were ISA Certified Arborists® and Tree Worker/Climber Specialists®.

The two scholarship recipients, Yael Franco and Shirin Cooper, thanks to WCISA and A Plus Tree.



For the next two workshops, Julia relied on Rhonda and two new instructors from the Western Chapter: Arabella (Bella) Rammon, principal of Alpha Tree, Reno, NV, and Christina Cloer, Tree Worker/Climber Specialists® and the first accredited woman journeyman tree worker in Arizona (APS Arizona Public Service). They are known for their skill and success at regional and International Tree Climbing Competitions and both are ISA Certified Arborists®. They also have extensive on-the-job teaching experience.

Sara Toney, a professional photographer, volunteered her services to photograph the event and document the various activities, the interaction and esprit de corps, as well as the participants and instructors in action, for all three events. Julia Jones, Vice Chair of the WCISA Women in Arboriculture committee has also participated in all three workshops. She is an Interfaith Minister and founded Interfaith Forestry in Sacramento. Furthermore, she's the Urban Forestry Supervisor of the City of Davis.

What's most unique about the workshops is the participant's energy, enthusiasm, eagerness to learn, and sense of purpose and the instructor's passion to teach and to support the group. There was, as you may expect, some initial uneasiness about climbing and the inherent risks, but that was generally short-lived. The instructors and workshop organizers have been encouraged by the positive results and glowing comments they've received from the participants. The women appreciated being able to learn with other women. They were able to focus on the job and felt more at ease, less self-conscious.

A sizeable number of women who've attended one or more of the workshops, had never climbed before, and many admitted that climbing was outside their comfort zones. Yet, there they were. Each participant came with some goal in mind, and everyone came away trans-

formed in one way or another and more confident.

Rhonda commented that she found her role as an instructor especially gratifying because everyone was so excited, attentive, and eager to learn. "It's worth every minute seeing the elation when the participants realized their aspirations turned to success." Sara offered this: "I see women finding out what kind of climber they want to be and then hear them talk about how they'll put that skill to use. Their growing confidence from novices on the first day to being able to climb to the limits of the ropes on the last day is a delight to see. They overcome the initial challenges with such determination and humor."

Christina Cloer, who has been teaching men to climb for 14 years, said that "she had never, until then, instructed women on how to climb. I like that teaching women about climbing is also about them letting go of fear or self-doubt. You really get to know someone when you are walking them through a difficult maneuver, and seeing them apply that information later. Being an instructor and part of a team has been very rewarding and an amazing opportunity. Seeing the light in their eyes as goals are met, boundaries are pushed, and limits are now endless is what makes me want to come back year-after-year!"

Interest in the women-only workshop is growing and has attracted women from a wide range of fields in and related to arboriculture. These workshops have been so successful, because the focus is on building confidence and providing support while learning to climb.

The workshops are a starting point, a lot of practice and training will be needed, just like for their male counterparts. Another feature these workshops offer is connections with other women climbers. In this manner, they can do their own training sessions to advance their skill levels. What we're really doing here is promoting arboriculture



Organizers: Christian Cloer, Bella Rammon, Rhonda Wood, and Julia Bartens.

Upcoming Women's Climbing Workshops:

- June 7-9, 2019, PNWISA – Seattle, WA - workshop full
- August 2-4, 2019, WCISA – Applegate, CA
- September 12-15, 2019, Women's Tree Climbing Workshop (WTCW) Petersham, MA

as a career choice for women and establishing a core of highly trained and talented women to carry on in the future. This serves the interests of everyone in the chapter. Another direct benefit is that the workshops promote teamwork, sharing of information, and the opportunity to network with other women who are interested in climbing and other aspects of arboriculture or natural science. We've noted that many of the returning climbers have continued to practice and their skill levels are much improved, to the point that they offer tips and can assist the other participants.

Christina Cloer, who regularly trains men to climb had this to say: "When it comes to training men or women climbers, there are only mi-

nor differences. What I've seen is that the women are focused, and committed. They give 100 percent." To paraphrase her: Without question, women are "strong, brave, and confident," given the opportunity, support, and training. She added that the workshops have been very successful in developing confidence among the participants, and the conviction they can do whatever they set their minds to.

At least, in the modern world, women have or are gaining acceptance in many fields previously dominated by men. But achieving equality in all professions and occupations will take time. Women in this country still seek equal compensation and recognition for their work and contributions. As Julia Bartens notes

“these workshops help women feel confident and skilled but society really has to change for us to be equally desirable” [in the workplace].

Women today have many role models. Even in arboriculture there are icons and standouts, but in tree climbing, a very specialized pursuit, the numbers are disappointing. We know that nearly anyone can climb if they have a desire and set their minds to it, but few women see climbing as a career choice. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that there are too few women climbers to generate much interest. Another issue is there are only a handful of women climbers who teach or are good at it. Therefore, these workshops provide an opportunity for women to see that other women are interested and that they too can be successful at it.

Not everyone has been as fortunate as I have in receiving training from Chad Brey and later Jacob McNeil from Oakland Aesthetics. Many women climbers had to get their training by attending male-dominated workshops. This undoubtedly took tenacity, and a strong will, because they had to work harder at it to prove themselves. But climbing also requires consistency. Again, I was fortunate to know Jacob. He became that climbing buddy several times a month to practice with on the job, share information and to look to for advice and support climbing and pruning in the trees.

Just like my story where Chad extended a rope to me, these workshops ‘extend a rope’ to many wom-

en and provide a unique way to ‘ascend’ in trees as well as in their career choice. There are many reasons why an employer may be reluctant to hire a woman climber, but to be summarily rejected on the basis of gender should not be one of them. According to Rhonda, the biggest struggle for women is getting the opportunity to prove themselves.

These workshops provide a path to more possibilities for women doing tree work. For Julia Bartens, the goals of the workshop stay true to her original vision. “My goal is to continue to offer this unique learning experience in a safe and comfortable environment.” This workshop attracts a diverse group of women from around the Western Region. Women like Bella, Rhonda, and Christina, Bear, and Melissa have found a special calling in this changing industry, and like Bella said, “I like to teach women to climb because I think that women are under-represented in this industry.”

Many people find trees fascinating and enjoy climbing in them. This may explain why a lot of people, both men and women, are attracted to trees and the tree care industry. Unfortunately, the number of women in the profession pales in comparison to the number of men. At present there is a small, but growing number of women climbers. Perhaps, the reason for this is that our notion of what’s possible for us is shaped largely by what we see in the world around us. For me and many of the women I know, the path to becoming a climb-

ing arborist hasn’t been easy. I’d like to say the profession has been open and welcoming, but I can’t. There are, of course, some exceptions. My involvement in the women’s climbing workshops has been rewarding, knowing that I’ve been able to help other women get started. The experience, though, has also helped me overcome challenges in my life and advance in my career. These workshops reach out to women in special ways. They help to build the confidence and skills needed in the industry, increasing opportunities by building a network of women working in all facets of arboriculture.

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