

Headline: Women, find your inner monkey among the ropes

Instructor Tina Aldrich is telling me about a physical and mental challenge politely called the “Pamper Pole.”

As she talks about climbing a 25-foot standard telephone pole, with staples for foot rests and hand holds, my palms begin to sweat. Then she explains about stepping onto an open platform the size of a dinner plate at the top. My heartbeat bounces.

Then the kicker:

“If you wish, you may jump off the platform,” Aldrich says.

Right.

The climber, who accepts this challenge, wears a helmet and a full body harness attached to three ropes, with people on the ground belaying the ropes or making them secure. Each rope can lift about 3,000 pounds and is checked twice every time the rope is used for wear and tear. Carabiners and cables also are inspected regularly.

In other words, there is no actual risk here of getting hurt.

“It’s all about perceived risk,” instructor Michelle Dennis explains. “You are safe. We are only asking that you put your toes over your personal limit, whatever it may be.”

The “pamper” in this challenge refers to all the people on the ground who are caring for the climber. Some have referred to it as the “Pampers Pole,” in a reference to what you might need to be wearing, if you defy fear and leap.

Aldrich and Dennis are certified instructors with Blackhawk Technical College’s Ed-Venture Program. They guide groups through the challenge course, sometimes also referred to as the ropes course. By engaging people in a series of activities, both above and on the ground, they hope to provide an important and sometimes transformative experience. The experience, in turn, gives people greater self-confidence and motivation in everyday life.

“With success here, maybe you can walk into that interview and be more successful,” says Jeff Messer, coordinator of the Ed-Venture program.

In fair weather, the course at Blackhawk Tech hosts at least one group a week, ranging from corporate teams to school kids to at-risk teens. Two workshops for women only will be held in July and August. The three-hour experiences promise to be unforgettable as women of all ages choose to embrace new adventures.

The key word here is “choose.”

“It is always challenge by choice,” Aldrich says. “You don’t have to do anything outside your comfort zone, but we would like you to stretch your limit a little.”

For some women, climbing half way up the pole will be enough. For others, it might be just putting on the harness and entertaining the idea. How much you do is always up to you.

“We offer people the opportunity to change,” Dennis says. “They will be changed as much as they choose.”

Instructors say there are advantages to a “women-only” experience offered for the first time at Blackhawk Tech.

“Men and women deal with challenges in different ways,” Dennis says. “Men tend to want to step in and take care of women. We are taking unhealthy pieces out of the equation to build camaraderie of equals.”

Instructors always remind participants to be supportive of each other.

“We all want each other to succeed,” Aldrich says. “We don’t want someone to be walked over every day or to be left behind.”

Physically, the course requires climbing, balancing, reaching, swinging and jumping—or getting in touch with your inner monkey. But what happens mentally is just as important. It takes problem solving, cooperation, patience and mind-over-body focus to do the tasks that usually start easy and end hard.

Challenges go by many creative names. On the ground, a “spider’s web” can involve physically passing a person through the holes in the ropes without touching them; the “wild woozy” tests your ability to trust your partner; and “the king’s finger” requires people to take truck tires off an 8-foot vertical pole without touching the pole. It may look easy, but think before you start.

Above-the-ground challenges take place from 25 feet to 40 feet up. They include the traditional 40-foot climbing wall; “the flying squirrel,” which suspends you 20 feet off the ground, just long enough to strike a pose; and the “hourglass,” which apparently lets you experience jelly legs 30 feet above terra firma. People who are not climbing take responsibility for belaying, communicating and supporting someone else who is climbing. In this way, the instructors say the course can be used to develop compassion, empathy, communication and cooperation among group members.

Dennis recalls one of the most dramatic examples of transformation in a challenge course. She was conducting a workshop for abused women. One of the women with little self confidence climbed a 40-foot pole and declared: “I’m free. I can breathe up here.”

“It was an epiphany for her,” Dennis says.

“All her life she was told that she was helpless and useless. Not everyone has a powerful moment like that, but it can be that powerful.”

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CHALLENGE COURSES FOR WOMEN

Blackhawk Technical College is offering two challenge courses for women and facilitated by women. They are from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesday, July 29; and Saturday, Aug. 8, at the campus between Beloit and Janesville on County G. The “Women’s Edventure” is limited to 15; costs \$25 each; and will be held rain or shine. For more information about the women’s workshops or to schedule a co-ed group experience, contact Jeff Messer, coordinator, at (608) 757-6332; email: jmesser@blackhawk.edu
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