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Conquering their fears

Camp teaches women outdoors skills, from rappelling to shooting to what to do when nature calls

Story and photos by Corinne Purtill The Arizona Republic
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PRESCOTT - She wasn't going to jump. » Rebecca Manley told herself that just climbing to the top of the 18-foot-high platform was enough. There was no way she could grab a zip line and zoom through ponderosa pines. Heights terrified her. Not gonna happen. » But then she heard them cheering. » Her fellow campers were calling her name, assuring her that she could do this. Fear of heights be damned. » So she jumped. She loved it. » "It was awesome!" said Manley, 50, a postal clerk from Lake Havasu City. "I don't think I could have done any of these challenges without the girls below."

That's the point of Becoming an Outdoorswoman, a national program that teaches women outdoor skills in the company of their fellow chicks.

For three days every April and August at Friendly Pines Camp near Prescott, women try things they're scared to try and ask questions without embarrassment. They paddle, shoot and rappel. They get tipsy and prank-call their husbands with their bunkmates.

BOW was founded in 1991 by Christine Thomas of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. A lifelong outdoors enthusiast, Thomas wanted to create a program that would teach women outdoor skills in a non-threatening environment.

Today, more than 20,000 women participate each year in BOW programs across the United States, Canada and New Zealand. The Arizona Wildlife Federation hosts the program in this state.

Last month, 101 women ages 18 to 76 gathered at Friendly Pines. Women in full makeup and salon-fresh curls sat next to sunburned broads in camouflage pants.

No previous outdoor experience is necessary. Participants range from first-time campers to seasoned hunters and backpackers. The goal is to help women appreciate the outdoors, no matter where they're coming from.

"If you don't know (what's out there), you can't love it," coordinator Linda Dightmon said.

If ya gotta go . . .

In a cozy wooden cabin with a gentle rain pattering outside, instructor Holly Dickinson explained to a rapt group of women how to relieve oneself in the woods.

The broad, fuzzy leaves of the mullen plant make good toilet paper. Find a sturdy log to lean against if you're going to, you know, be a while. And don't forget the plastic bags to pack out used items, so that the campsite stays as pristine as you found it.

Fear of being unsanitary scares a lot of women away from serious outdoor activity, said Dickinson, 38, a Phoenix mother of four and Boy and Girl Scout leader.

Let's face it: A husband or boyfriend can't teach you how to pee in the woods, much less explain how to improvise should you find yourself suddenly in need of a feminine-hygiene product.

In an all-girl environment, women are less intimidated about asking questions on how to deal with embarrassing personal ailments.

The lack of female perspective on the trail is something camper Christine Thomas, 59, of Poland Junction, knows all too well.

An experienced bow hunter, Thomas, who is no relation to BOW's founder, usually finds herself as the sole woman on the hunting trips with her husband.

"I don't have a lot of girlfriend outdoor enthusiasts," she said. To her, the best part of BOW is "just being around women that like the outdoors."

Down a mountain!

Louise Koller, 69, reached for a cup of joe in the mess hall at 7:30 Saturday morning.

"I usually don't drink coffee in the morning, but I'm taking firearm safety today and I think I should be alert," she confided.

This was Koller's third BOW camp. The Prescott Valley resident signed up after her husband died two years ago. The camp gave her a reason to get out of the house.

Now, "my grandson calls me the extreme grandma," she said.

Koller signed up for a rappelling class that first time to conquer a fear of heights. Now she's training for a hike into the Grand Canyon.

BOW does that to people.

After lunch, the women of Rappelling 101 hiked to the top of a rocky overhang, where married instructors Jeff Sorensen and Joy Hernbrode affixed to trees ropes and a canopy for their Weimaraners.

It wasn't a dead drop - but it was nothing you'd want to walk over backward. Which is precisely what everyone was about to do.

Kim Buffalo's voice cracked with fear as Sorensen adjusted her harness. She and her daughter Danette, 19, had traveled to Friendly Pines from Glendale. Now, the 52-year-old gripped her rope and looked tentatively at the drop behind her.

Less than halfway down, exuberance replaced fear. She threw her arms over her head triumphantly.

"I'm going down the side of a mountain!" she cried.

Her fellow outdoorswomen hooted and applauded.

Bugged by her own fear

The last day of camp rolled around. Hugs, e-mail addresses and phone numbers were exchanged.

I had my own little triumph to feel good about. At a fly-tying class two nights earlier, a beetle roughly the size of a cellphone landed on the shirt of the woman next to me.

In terms of things I despise, enormous bugs rank somewhere between genocide and mold. I jumped and nearly impaled the woman with my fishhook.

As the instructor scooped up the beetle to carry it outside, I realized that this was my chance to face a wild thing that had scared me.

I held my breath. The instructor placed the bug in my palm. It crawled around in a way that felt friendly, like the lizard your second-grade class used to keep as a pet, back before it occurred to a girl to be scared of the world around her.

It feels good to be an outdoorswoman.

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