

FITNESS FOR A CAUSE:

Boulderites mix athleticism with volunteerism

By Aimee Heckel, Camera Staff Writer, 09/15/2009

When you're dangling off a mountain's edge, the bodies below you looking like grains of sand, you can feel very alone. Sometimes that's a beautiful thing. But other times, rock climbing -- just like other athletic pursuits -- can become highly individualistic and even selfish, says Andrew Councell. Athletes can become so focused on what they put inside their bellies and how their bodies and minds are performing, that they don't see farther than their own shoelaces.

Not Councell. The Estes Park man, who works at Boulder's Colorado Mountain School, has found a way to combine his passion for mountains with helping people around the world. You've heard of races for cures and causes. But using fitness for a Curt Flather, front, hikes Green Mountain with his son, Dylan, left, and wife Paula, right, in an effort to raise money for Educate!, a group that sponsors education programs in Africa. About 50 people showed up for the event. Educate! was started by Eric Glustrom when he was a junior in high school. (Rachel Berns) good cause can involve much more.

Boulder County boasts volunteer programs and fundraisers for climbers, hikers, yogis, nutrition experts, outdoor lovers and even just regular folks looking for an extra excuse to exercise. For some people, it might just mean swapping out one regular workout per week to play tennis with an at-risk kid or teach yoga to domestic-abuse survivors. Others have made volunteer fitness the center of their lives.

Alexia Nestoria, a consultant for the volunteer travel industry, says increasingly more people are mixing their hobbies with humanitarian work. Just about five years ago, Nestoria says there were 10 companies in the world that offered volunteer vacations. Today, there are hundreds. It's common for outdoor adventure companies and fitness excursions have humanitarian components. Take Ambassadors for Children (ambassadorsforchildren.org), which recently launched yoga volunteer trips in Costa Rica and India. "The companies have realized this is the market and are marketing a new product," she says. "Everyone wants to volunteer." Especially in Boulder, a city equally known for its social consciousness as for its athletic prowess.

For Councell, that combo brought him to Pakistan, where he volunteered for three weeks with the International Mountain Leadership Institute. He trained Balti porters in mountain-guiding skills, such as crevasse rescue, tying knots, first-aid, and navigation. The class was aimed to help increase the tourist industry in that region and empower the porters and farmers to transform their lives.

"It made me feel like it wasn't just something I'm doing on my own. It's building a community of people who care," Councell says. "And its teaching them that the mountains aren't just a barrier or limitation. They're a great resource, a place to get centered and come back to the reality of life, rather than perceived reality." "The most fulfilling classes that I teach' Like climbing, yoga can also become internally focused, says Nancy Candea, of Boulder. "Our fitness routines and lives can become almost narcissistic," she says. "But if we can, as human beings who care about our own bodies, turn that outward, it matures us."

Candea recognized that several years ago, after she moved to Boulder from Hawaii. "Even though I was enjoying my teaching, I felt like my career was 'Hmm, am I just going to teach sun salutations to white women all my life?'" she says. "I have always wanted to work for the UN, and then I realized there are refugee camps in our own backyard that we don't look at." That's when Candea went back to school to become a yoga therapist, with a focus on teaching yoga in difficult places. She began teaching yoga to prisoners at the Boulder County Jail through the Prison Dharma Network. She volunteered to teach yoga and nutrition to women at the Boulder County Safehouse. And she started working with the Youth Services Initiative to bring yoga to low-income and immigrant children. "When people go through trauma or depression, their lives are just about survival and they lose touch with their bodies," Candea says. "When they're even just a little physical, it changes their lives so much because their bodies are not use to it. It's a huge shift."

In February, Candea opened her own nonprofit, Satellite Yoga, which offers various outlets for the community to get involved, from fundraising to teaching. And it's worth it, she says. "These are the most fulfilling classes that I teach," Candea says. "After I help a woman who has lupus and she's just been raped -- and I help her learn how to breathe and calm herself down -- I feel like I'm teaching life skills that will last forever." Using what you already know You're doing it anyway. You might as well do something with it.

That's Scott Layne's belief. Layne, a 2003 Boulder High graduate, is studying physical therapy at the University of Southern California. As an extension of his education, he volunteered with children with special needs summer camp in Oklahoma, exercising with them and helping them develop physical skills. In California, Layne has volunteered teaching after-school phys ed classes to low-income kindergartners. He says the children started the program shy and awkward; many hadn't done anything like it before. But by the end of the six weeks, he says the kids had more self-esteem -- and a lot more to say. "This is something that I love, something I am going to school for," Layne says. "It's a way for me to use my knowledge to help individuals who might not get it in any other situation." Not to mention, it's fun - - throwing balls, bowling, rafting, running through the park, trying new dance classes, says Alex Zinga. Zinga is the program coordinator for Boulder's Youth Services Initiative, which serves nearly 150 local low-income kids in after-school and summer recreation camps. Many of the participants couldn't otherwise afford to go to the rec center or learn new sports, or they might have language or cultural barriers, Zinga says. "Boulder's such an active community," she says. "That's why people live here: the rec centers, trails, parks. Fitness is valued -- and that should include everyone." A deeper connection Hiking is where Educate began. It's only fitting that the Boulder nonprofit's latest fundraiser centers around the mountains. Educate is a nonprofit that teaches young Africans about leadership and social responsibility, providing long-term mentoring in hopes of inspiring the next generation of leaders.

Eric Glustrom, of Boulder, began raising money for the cause in 2002 by climbing fourteeners and asking friends and family to sponsor him. On Sunday, Educate organized a Climb for Uganda fundraiser; while an estimated 200 local volunteers scaled Flagstaff Mountain, a group of African students hiked a mountain in Kampala, Uganda, according to spokeswoman Maya Ellman. "It brings everyone together, even though we're so far away," she says. "We're hiking and climbing for the same cause." She says adding the physical component to volunteerism makes donors feel more invested; that's why some of the most successful fundraisers across the nation are races and relays. "Physical activity makes you feel like you're a part of something, not just writing a check for \$25," Ellman says. "You're sweating and huffing and puffing and working to raise that money. That helps people connect more."

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