

## Social Climbing in the Arts District

*What's Next for the Growing Community?  
How About a Place to Go 'Bouldering'?*

By Donna Evans

Harmony Smith loves a good problem. Standing atop a 14-inch thick crash pad, the 27-year-old scanned a chalk-dusted wall flecked with orange, blue and yellow tape aligned with myriad hand and footholds. She zeroed in on her path and stepped off the ground, beginning a stretching, grinding trek that had her scrabbling sideways and climbing vertically. Her goal was a green handle 12 feet above the floor.

About five minutes later, she reached the cherished handle. Victorious, the Starbucks barista and actress beamed at her accomplishment, dropped to the mat with a gymnast's grace and walked away, searching for the next challenge.

Smith was in LA Boulders, or L.A.B (pronounced lab), a 13,000-square-foot facility that opened last month in the Arts District, sandwiched between the Los Angeles Gun Club and the Factory Place Lofts.

It is most easily described as an indoor rock climbing facility, though practitioners prefer the term "bouldering." The attraction's manager, Remi Moehring, had a different description.

"It's an adult playground," she said on a recent Tuesday afternoon.

L.A.B is the ninth California gym for Touchstone Climbing, an indoor rock climbing company started in San Francisco in 1995 by Mark

and Debra Melvin. When they decided to look for a location in Los Angeles, they set their minds on an up-and-coming, industrial neighborhood. They settled on the mammoth structure just east of Factory Place, said Touchstone Climbing's Director of Operations Markham Connolly. The neighborhood "has a great community of fun people, interesting businesses and good restaurants," he said. He also pointed to the site's proximity to three freeways.

Although most people have never heard of bouldering, and particularly the indoor version, Moehring said it has been gaining momentum over the past decade. Unlike traditional rock climbing, no ropes or harnesses are involved. Instead, it's just the climber, usually wearing special shoes that allow for a firm grip on the wall.

At the bottom of a wall, the climber chooses a color-coded path or "problem" that guides him or her to the top. Those pathways, of which there are more than 100 at L.A.B, are ranked in difficulty on a 1-12 scale.

While L.A.B is a gym, complete with elliptical machines and treadmills (weights are scheduled to arrive this month), bouldering is not necessarily something people seek out as a means of getting in shape. Of course, hanging from fingertips and shifting your weight from one leg to the other to push yourself up a 17-foot wall builds core strength and boosts fore-



photo by Gary Leonard

LA Boulders opened in the Arts District in January. The 13,000-square-foot space has approximately 100 different climbs, with more to come.

arm, leg and back muscles, Moehring said.

"Exercise is a benefit, not the reason to do it," said Tom Clancey, a climber for 28 years and a L.A.B member who signed up before the gym

even opened.

"Yeah, those guns are just an occupational hazard," Moehring joked, pointing to the

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