



DAN COYRO/SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Diane Russell and Tom Davis opened Pacific Edge, one of the first climbing gyms in the nation, 20 years ago.

SANTA CRUZ

Climbing gym turns 20

By Jennifer Pittman
Santa Cruz Sentinel

SANTA CRUZ — The Pacific Edge Climbing Gym, one of the first indoor climbing gyms in the country, is celebrating 20 years of belaying up 50-foot walls, bouldering craggy caves and navigating a surge of enthusiasm for the indoor phenomenon.

"I always wanted to make a living as a climber," said Tom Davis, 51, who visited the few climbing gyms in existence back in the '90s before designing

what would then be one of the biggest indoor climbing gyms in the world. "It was a really big risk for a town this size."

Back then, indoor climbing was still an uncertain predilection for climbers accustomed to rappelling from more scenic venues such as Castle Rock or Yosemite. Experienced climbers sometimes created their own plywood training walls known as "woodies," covered with wooden hand grips, but the indoor walls with adjustable plas-

tic hand holds were still emerging.

Within months, however, the gym had several hundred members and novices were being trained on safety techniques. Women were encouraged to visit; youth classes and outreach to at-risk youth began and, today, the gym's membership tops 1,870.

In the last 20 years, there has been a surge in indoor climbing facilities and the numbers are growing, according to industry analysts and the compa-

nies that provide related products and gear. In the San Francisco Bay Area, there are nearly 20 climbing gyms. The Climbing Wall Association, a Boulder, Colo.-based national trade group, provides services to 400 companies in the business, according to its website.

"There's been an explosion in growth since we started," said Diane Russell, 58, an early competitive woman climber who was nationally ranked in the '90s.

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