

Ropes course focuses on power of learning

By Michelle Tan
Times staff writer

Heidi Everett firmly believes learning doesn't have to happen in a classroom.

Everett, manager of communications and creative services at Creative Memories, prefers learning by doing. That makes her a big proponent of the Husky Challenge, St. Cloud State University's new challenge course. The course, built to focus on the power of experiential learning, or learning by doing, is the newest addition to the campus's recreation program. The \$85,000 challenge course is a hit among business, school and community groups from as far away as the Twin Cities.

Visitors to the course, designed to challenge

Husky Challenge

For more information on St. Cloud State University's Husky Challenge or to register a group session, call 529-6691 or visit www.stcloudstate.edu/outings/husky_course.htm.

boundaries and build confidence, include groups from the Minnesota Wild; Boy Scouts of America; and The Antioch Co., owner of the Creative Memories scrapbook business.

People leave the course with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence, said Tom Heck, director of experiential learning and a key player in creating the course.

"The goal is when they walk away from here, they

have fun, we've challenged their boundaries and the way they do things in their setting," Heck said.

It took at least four years of planning to create the Husky Challenge, which sits on land subleased from the St. Cloud Children's Home. The course is nestled between the home and the university's K parking lot, south of campus.

An intimidating 30-foot tower, solid cables extended way above the ground and a bright silver trapeze bar held in place by a single cord 35 feet in the air are a few of the course's visual elements.

To build the course, \$33,000 was plucked from campus recreation's reserve account and \$27,000 came

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Ropes

in the form of a grant from St. Cloud State's academic distinction program. Another \$25,000 came from a Learning by Doing Grant from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Center for Teaching and Learning, with generous funding from the Bush Foundation, Heck said.

Mark Wagstaff, an outdoor recreation professor at St. Cloud State who has experience running a challenge course, helped create the course. Heck ran a challenge course in Montana.

Untested limits

Experiential learning is a powerful way to challenge people to stretch their boundaries, said Ron Seibring, director of sports facilities and campus recreation.

"When people think of the time they're most proud of themselves for accomplishing something ... it almost always involved risk," Seibring said. "That's what the challenge course does."

The course, with the luxury of about 500-by-250-feet of land, has permanent high and low elements and almost 30 portable low props. A real-life lesson is embedded in each exercise, Heck said. For example, a wide deck-like platform set on uneven ground is used to teach participants how to balance their lives.

"(The course) is fun, but the power is the educational process," Heck said. "This gives us an incredible learning tool outside the

classroom."

The Partnerships Offering Interaction, Knowledge and Trust, or POINT, program run by Stearns County Community Corrections relies on the challenge course as a learning tool, said Pat Pfannenstien, career agent with community corrections.

To accomplish that, POINT sends its teens, juveniles age 11 to 18, to challenge courses at St. Cloud State, St. John's University and Friendship Ventures.

"This works on positive asset building and it's a different way of working with these kids," Pfannenstien said. "We're working with their strengths and not their weaknesses."

POINT teens complete 40 hours on the challenge course.

"They are having experiences they've never had before," Pfannenstien said. "I see some real life changes."

Metaphors are used in every exercise to illustrate a point, Heck said.

"The beauty of it is we have goals (we help people reach) but people don't even realize we're doing it," Heck said. "And it's challenge by choice. It's not boot camp."

Participants can't force or yell at group members who feel uncomfortable participating in an event, Heck said.

"You decide if you want to do it," he said. "We're not going to build you up and squash you and kill your self-esteem."

Dynamic learning

Last fall, Everett took her co-workers to the Husky Challenge.

High-element exercises

Two trained facilitators moderate discussions and guide each group through St. Cloud State University's Husky Challenge. Tom Heck, director of experiential learning, recommends groups spend at least four hours at the course. People may choose to spend up to eight hours. Students who use the course are charged \$4 an hour per person. Adults are charged \$10. Groups are charged for a minimum of 10 people. All wear safety helmets and secure harnesses.

Here are some of the high-element exercises offered at the course.

- The Hourglass, also known as the Heebie Jeebie, has a person walking across a tightrope-like wire 30 feet above the ground. Two cables form an "X"

They wanted to use the course again this fall, but the calendar was booked. Everett hopes to use the course with her co-workers every year. The course is dynamic and flexible, so groups can visit more than once.

"It takes you away from office politics ... and puts you in a non-threatening environment to really examine how you work together," she said.

It forces participants to trust and communicate with and capitalize on their strengths and weaknesses, Everett said.

Currently, 12 faculty, staff and students are trained to operate the course, Heck said. A four-credit course taught by Wagstaff will be offered spring semester at St. Cloud State to train operators.

parallel to the wire for the participant to hold on to for support. The midpoint of the "X" is halfway across the wire, making it harder to hold on.

- The swinging ladder is a ladder suspended horizontally 30 feet in the air.

- A person using the rope bridge walks across a wire. For balance and support, he or she can grab on to ropes that hang vertically above the wire.

- Beginners and more experienced climbers can make use of two rock climbing walls.

- The Pamper Pole just might be the course's most challenging exercise. A participant climbs a 30-foot pole and balances on top. He or she then jumps upwards to grab and hold on to a trapeze bar suspended a little bit higher in the air.

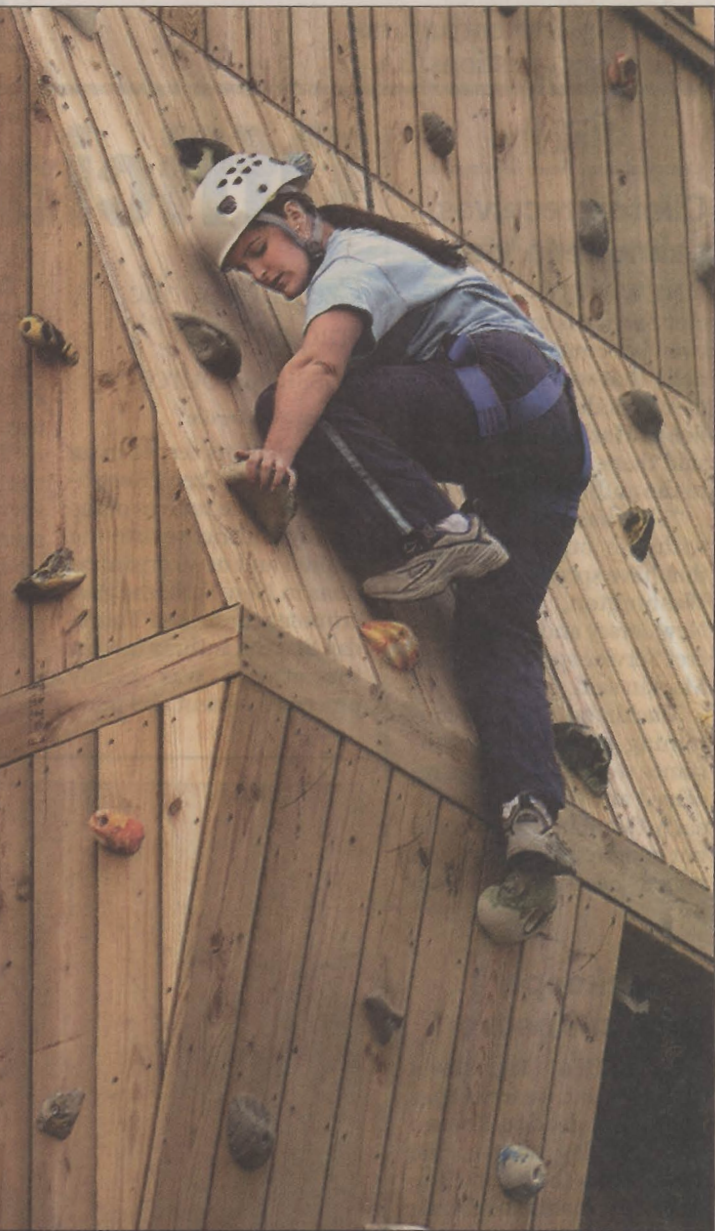
"We're going to need 40 trained people once we get going," Heck said. "Even without advertising, I've had to turn (groups) down."

Though St. Cloud State's mission is to serve students first, the staff wants to serve the community. The popularity of the course boils down to new and unknown things, Seibring said.

"This type of learning has really gained prominence in the past eight to 10 years and we haven't had the opportunity to offer it in this area."

People who use the course will leave satisfied, Seibring said.

"It's all process oriented, not task oriented. It's not if you successfully accomplished it or not, but how you went about accomplishing it."



imes photo by Paul Middlestaedt

enni Smith works her way up the 30-foot tower at St. Cloud State University's new challenge course.

Husky Challenge builds confidence



Times photo by Paul Middlestaedt

St. Cloud State University student Kevin Lynch works his way across ropes and wires while trying out the university's new challenge course.