



Breaking the ice ceiling

A group of women take on frozen mountains to prove to themselves they can do it

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

OURAY, Colo. — A burst of ice sprayed me and scattered down to the river below. I swung my ax again and sank its tip into a divot, and then rested against the wall, keeping my feet level so they wouldn't peel away and leave me dangling. My arms burned from fatigue, my knees quivered, and my mind was a cacophony of frustration and defeat.

"I'm in a pickle," I yelled. "I can't get over this bump."

"You're doing great," my belayer called up from below.

I clung to a 100-foot icefall in a gorge in western Colorado, trying to figure out a way over an awkward bulge in the ice so I could climb the remaining 20 feet to the top. Sunlight danced around the frozen waterfall, lighting up wonderful features that resembled jellyfish, mushrooms, and stalactites.

What am I doing here, I wondered. I can't climb stairs with missing risers, I don't do lighthouses, and my body shakes when I step onto the balconies of tall hotels. Yet my friend Sarah and I, both afraid of heights, had embraced the idea of a women's ice-climbing clinic when planning our annual gals getaway. Natural hot springs, female bonding, high adventure, and mental challenge — the perfect mix, we agreed, from the couches of our respective two-story homes.

We planned a week in Colorado, skiing at 12,300 feet in Telluride for a few days to acclimate from sea level, and then dropping down to 7,800 to complete a four-day Chicks With Picks ice-climbing clinic in nearby Ouray with some of the best female climbers and guides in the sport.

Kim Reynolds, a former Outward Bound and Antarctic Survival instructor, launched this program 16 years ago in a successful attempt to get more

women into the sport. She ran clinics in North Conway, N.H., for seven years and in Ouray until this year, when she sold the business to five of her guides, including legendary climber and mountaineer Kitty Calhoun (a graduate of the University of Vermont), Dawn Glanc, and Karen Bockel, all certified climbing guides who have led trips around the world.

Chicks Climbing will continue to run ice-climbing clinics (Chicks With Picks) and rock-climbing programs (Chicks Rock), but has added new ski mountaineering clinics under the name Chicks With Stix, and international trips.

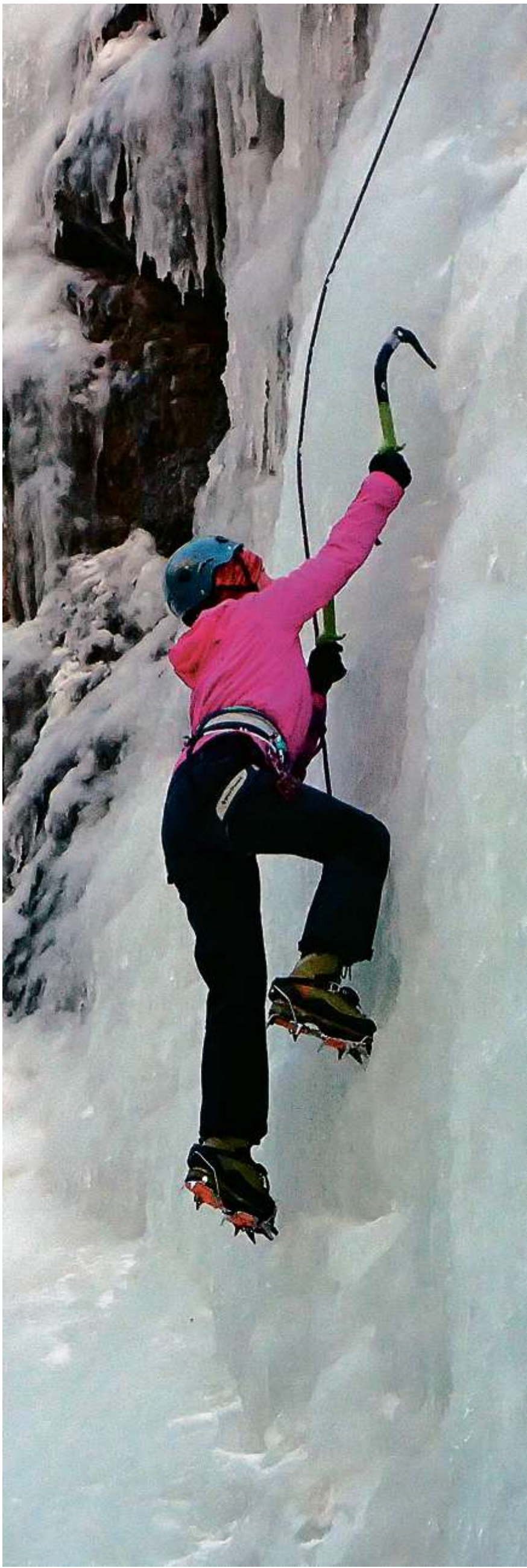
"Our mission is to empower women through mountain sports," says Bockel, originally from Germany, who was once a professional road biker and ski mountaineer.

Five ice-climbing programs take place in January and February, ranging from The Jiffy, a two-day weekend clinic, to The Complete, a four-day clinic that includes three days of ice climbing and one skills day, when participants can learn about rescue climbing, mixed climbing (combining rock and ice), and alpine skills (backcountry skiing and avalanche training), or spend another day on the ice.

The ice-climbing clinics take place in Ouray, a little town of about 1,000 ringed by volcanic, sandstone, and limestone mountains, and blessed with natural thermal springs. In the summertime, the town hosts an annual water fight, complete with fire hoses, that's been a tradition here since 1927. Canyoning, or rappelling through waterfalls in local canyons, draws adventurers to the area too.

Come winter, though, ice farmers create a fantastic wonderland in the Uncompahgre Gorge on the south side of town using water pipes, sprinklers, and Mother Nature's cold temps.

"It's a real science to how the misters are set up and pointed," said Heidi Pankow from the town's Chamber of



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

ing breakfasts that's a short walk from the Ouray Ice Park. The course starts with a night of introductions and handing out demo gear, from harnesses and ice-climbing boots to warm oversize jackets that layer over climbing wear (you don't need to bring any gear).

"Don't forget your mountain make-up," Glanc reminded us, holding up her sunscreen and ChapStick.

The instructors divided us into four groups, based on ability, and we set off the next morning for the ice park. Here, Bockel, our guide, explained everything from how to attach our harnesses and crampons, and how to hold our axes, to the proper techniques for efficiently climbing up the ice.

"Keep your feet a little more than shoulder width apart and kick from your knee," she said. "Now focus on rhythm: Kick, kick, swing. Kick, kick, swing. Remember, you always want to keep three points of contact on the ice."

I thought we would start by climbing up 20 or 30 feet, and then ascending higher and higher during the course of the clinic. Instead, we climbed up to 100 feet on our very first route, an accomplishment that would have suited me fine and proven my money's worth had it been our crowning achievement on day four. When I mentioned that to Reynolds, she said, "We know you have more in you than that."

Each day, we took turns climbing 100-foot walls and belaying our partners, and moving around to different routes, some trickier than others.

"I don't pay attention to the ratings that much," Bockel said when we ask about the difficulty levels of our climbs. "For me, it's 'fun,' 'more fun,' and 'most fun.'"

We broke up the climbs with swinging practice and lessons on tying different knots, and watched other groups on neighboring routes. Quiet chatter and the sound of falling ice filtered down the gorge. Day three, Sarah and I decided we wanted a mental break from the intensity of climbing and opted for the Alpine Skills clinic with Calhoun. She took us to Red Mountain Pass, where we skinned-up (put no-slip felt material on the bottom of our skis) and skied into the wilderness. Here, Calhoun taught us how to use avalanche beacons, dig snow caves, and assess the snow and landscape in potential avalanche zones.

At the end of each day, we lounged in the outdoor hot tub at the inn, or went to the thermal pool in town. One night, Calhoun ran a session on breathing, posture, awareness, and attitude for climbing.

"Your whole mental attitude affects how well you do," Calhoun said. "Visualize yourself relaxed and smoothly making moves. . . . I smile at the ice, and occasionally I'll use mantras, especially when I'm really scared."

I tried to remember this when I was stuck in that spot nearly eight stories above the valley floor.

"Don't look, Karen," I finally said to Bockel. "This is going to be a very unorthodox move."

I leaned away from the bulge in the ice, tapped my inner feisty spirit, and then lunged, leaving just one foot and one pick on the ice as I leapt up. Thanks to sheer luck and a willful swing, I managed to plant the other ax into a sweet spot on the ice, and successfully kicked my free foot into a foothold way up high. I quickly readjusted my positioning, and then methodically continued up the ice — kick, kick, swing, kick, kick, swing — until I made it to the top of the route. My body relaxed after the intensity of the climb and filled with a great sense of relief and achievement. I paused to look out at the canyon's glittering sculpted walls before rappelling back down to the frozen river below.

"Way to get it done!" Bockel said.

We climbed nearly a dozen routes during the clinic, none any taller than the heights we had reached our first day. We still got nervous on every climb, but our technique improved as we learned to maneuver around the vertical landscape and get over the mental humps — the self-doubt — that could have held us back. More important, we learned to smile at the ice whether we were scared, stuck, or just having fun.

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Top left: Sarah Heckles of Portland, Ore., gets instruction from climbing guide Karen Bockel. **Above:** Dani Sadorf of San Diego in the Ouray Ice Park.

Below: instructor Kitty Calhoun (far left) in a snow cave in Colorado with (from left) Holly Mullally of Seattle, Heckles, and Kari Bodnarchuk.

Commerce. "They put on the misty fountains at 4:30 p.m. as long as it's at least 27 degrees out [and not snowing] and those run until about 6 a.m."

More than 150,000 gallons of water typically get sprayed onto the canyon walls each night. The result: The Ouray Ice Park, a mile-long park with more than 200 natural and man-made climbing routes. The park hosts the world-renowned Ouray Ice Festival each year, which Glanc has won twice in the women's division, and proves the perfect learning ground for people, whether they are doing advanced mixed climbing, or are completely new to the sport, like Sarah and me.

Our group included four Wilderness Medicine Fellows from Massachusetts General Hospital, a graphic designer, a wildland firefighter, a paramedic, a writer, and a retired mother of six.

We all stayed at the Victorian Inn, a simple but clean motel-style property with an outdoor hot tub and nourish-

