

Reilly Oare

12<sup>th</sup>, Fauquier High School

Warrenton, VA

### Climbing Seneca Rocks

Two years ago, my entire body trembled on the wall, a thin piece of lichen about to flutter off the rock. The sun's beams reflected on my back and were amplified by the corner my legs were stemming from. With each breath, I could feel a distinct buzzing entering my fingertips -- hyperventilation. Fear had set in, and I was drowning one thousand feet above the river far below. With a glance at my last piece of gear and a rattling breath, I willed my arms to pull in as I pressed up, reaching for a seam in the rock. Suddenly, my foot shot out from underneath me. Before I could realize what had happened, I was dangling on the rope twenty feet below my original position. I shook my head as I began to tear up. I laughed, and after a quick exchange with my belayer, I started climbing back up the face.

I began rock climbing when I was thirteen years old. I had never been particularly interested in the outdoors before, and I did not go out of my way to search for adventure. Throughout my life, I did everything in my power to stay securely within arm's reach of my abilities. At school, I remained quiet and unobtrusive. During soccer practice and games, I appeared on the field where I was needed.

When I started climbing indoors, I was not initially interested. The unfamiliar heights would rip the air from my lungs, and the colorful, plastic holds held no allure for me. One day, however, I was pushed to attend a week-long outdoor climbing camp. I immediately fell in love. As my fingertips made contact with smooth sandstone, something clicked, and a glowing passion has been inflamed since then. In this environment, variables of nature and rope systems are unpredictable, and with a single misstep, possibly fatal.

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One element of climbing that I have strived to perfect for two years now is the art of trad climbing, or traditional climbing. In trad climbing, the climber on the leading rope places various pieces of gear into the wall, intermittently protecting themselves from falls as they climb upwards. Although the gear is all safe on its own, risk begins to creep in as rock quality and the leader's abilities determine if the climber will remain safe during a fall. Throughout the time of my instruction, I had restricted myself to trad climb on walls that served no trouble to me, staying safely within my limits. One day, climbing at Seneca Rocks, West Virginia, my mentor had a different idea.

Seneca Rocks is infamously known for its dangerous conditions. Mumbles of "frequent rock fall" and "cryptic gear placements" surround the area, yet my adoration for Seneca remains constant. The structure serves as a monument to the beginning of my climbing career, a fin of rock jutting proudly above the tree line, awaiting adventures to take place upon its walls. On a brisk, January day, my mentor and I hiked up to the base of the giant flake, ready to begin another adventure. We had spoken about a few climbs that we planned on doing, and we began by climbing the easiest routes to drop ropes down over climbs that were difficult for us, a technique that increases the safety for the climbers. The entire day, we jumped from climb to climb, enjoying the unusually blue-bird day and the enticing puzzles the rock would lay before us. By an hour before sunset, we had run out of climbs from the list we had produced earlier. I was about to suggest heading down the mountain early when my mentor mentioned a climb that had been seared into my memory for years. "Pollux" was a fifty-foot tall route that followed a prominent, wandering crack in the sandstone. The first time I had visited Seneca Rocks, the group of strong climbers I had been with had climbed the seemingly difficult beast, allowing me

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to try it on a previously hung rope. At that time, the climbing style had been nearly impossible for me to top the wall, and I stood back in awe as the other climbers danced up Pollux with precision and confidence.

This day, however, the climb was resting on my shoulders. As we walked towards Pollux, my mind wandered back to when I began placing gear, falling and shaking on routes far easier than this. At the base of the climb, I focused on taking in deep, slow breaths of the winter air. I visualized my hands and feet following the crack up the wall, each movement deliberately crafted by the mountains for me to complete. Suddenly, I was climbing. My body shivered slightly with nervous energy, but my fingers continued to hold me securely on the wall. Each foot placement was confident, shifting weight over smooth inconsistencies in the rock. Each piece of gear I placed felt natural and known. My mind was cleared, and after just ten minutes, I arrived safely at the anchors of Pollux with a broad smile across my face.

Moments like these make climbing addicting. In the mountains, precision, intelligence, compassion, and patience are woven into a breathtaking tapestry. Here, lessons from the rock shiver through your bones, and hymns from the trees rush into your bloodstream. Here, my life and others' are placed into my calloused hands as my knowledge of ropes and quick decision-making determine if I return home safely. Even as I travel further from the steady ground, I am soothed. My mind is calmed by the sense of personal awareness that becomes so evident on a granite slab. Like the ancient Aztecs, each delicate step upward brings me closer to the stars, walking the thin tightrope towards heaven.

I am undoubtedly grateful for the gifts climbing has entrusted to me: ignorance and fear. For two years, I have fought tirelessly to take advantage of these. I do not allow my youth to

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imprison my opportunities and am consistently grateful for any criticism offered by others. As I venture further from the comfort of climbing with mentors, my visions of independence and competence have flourished. Previously, moments of terror were crippling, causing me to freeze and panic. Now, I carry the ability to square both shoulders and respect its presence, an invaluable skill. Through climbing, I have learned to attack my problems with creativity and determination, holding confidence in my decisions and actions.

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