

A photograph of four women rock climbing in a forest. They are wearing helmets and harnesses, and are secured by ropes. The background is a dense forest with large rocks and green foliage. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

WHAT ROCK GUIDING AND DEI WORK DON'T HAVE IN COMMON

BY: RYAN ERNSTES

Ten women gather in New River Gorge, WV for a rock guiding instructor course. Together they reflect upon their experiences as women in a male-dominated field, and learn what rock guiding and DEI work don't have in common.



Left: Elaina Arenz demonstrates rope ascension techniques while leading the three day Women's Affinity SPI course. Right: Brenna Stow gives a big thumbs up before starting a rappel.

Shemla Jun (she/her), sits cross-legged on a picnic table, laptop perched across her legs with a sticker of a flexed bicep on front that reads "Girl Crew." In the background, the verdant woods are abuzz with a cacophony of insects, giving the impression that we're deep in the jungle in Thailand, not New River Gorge, West Virginia. A warm breeze blows through the campground pavilion and the shade offers welcome relief for our group after the first of three 10-hour days rehearsing rope skills and guiding technique.

We're all here for the Single Pitch Instructor (SPI) Course, the first

step in a professionally accredited certification pathway for aspiring rock climbing guides. The American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) operates over one hundred SPI courses across the country each year, training participants to meet internationally recognized standards in various rope, safety, and guiding skills.

However, this particular rendition of the course is unique. Made up of only women, the goal is to reduce barriers to enter rock guiding and offer an inclusive and empowering learning environment. It's one of the AMGA's select programs which give underrepresented groups the chance

to learn with individuals who share a common identity, or affinity. Co-sponsoring the course are Brown Girls Climb and Flash Foxy, a womens and genderqueer climbing community that Jun founded in 2014. Tonight, Jun leads the group in a conversation around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issues and the unique challenges women face in the world of guiding.

Quickly, the conversation turns to impostor syndrome and women feeling the need to prove their skill set before entering a guiding role. Obtaining an SPI certification only requires a candidate to lead climb at the 5.8 level, yet many women

"Many women feel pressure to climb well into the double digit grades in order to justify their competency as a guide."

feel pressure to climb well into the double digit grades in order to justify their competency as a guide. Jun admits clients will sometimes ask her in guiding settings, “So do you climb 5.12?” To that she’ll cheekily respond, “You know what, don’t worry about it. We’re climbing 5.7 today and I’m great at climbing 5.7.”

Jun’s natural charisma allows equal space for lightheartedness and meaningful conversation as we reminisce on our shared experiences in the outdoors. Many members of the group are not just women, but hold other intersectional identities as well. Among us we have an expecting mother, a professional athlete, climbers who are a part of the adaptive and transgender communities, and more. We all have our unique reasons for being here. Many in the group want to help equalize the gender imbalance in rock guiding.

Sonja Hakanson, a high school teacher from Minneapolis, says she’s experienced gender bias already as a kayaking guide. Memorably, one of her most antagonistic clients was another woman who constantly questioned Hakanson’s calls on the water. After an exhausting day, Hakanson retained the emotional reserves to confront the client about her behavior head on. But it goes to show that even as women, we aren’t immune to gender bias or other identity related prejudices against one another. That’s one reason

why affinity work is so important.

Dr. Lisa Flores, Associate Dean of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of Colorado Boulder compares the process of DEI work to dental hygiene. She credits the analogy to Jay Smooth, a New York hip hop radio host, and says that just like flossing and brushing our teeth on a daily basis, DEI work requires constant application and will never be done.

Not everyone in the group intends to go into professional guiding. But currently the AMGA does not offer a recreational equivalent to the SPI course, so for climbers who want to hone and certify their skills in an accredited fashion, this is presently one of the best options. So throughout the three days, myself and the nine other course participants practice trad anchors, belay takeovers, rope ascent and climber rescue, BHKs (big honkin’ knots), top managed systems, Munter Mule hitches, and the list goes on.

One theme throughout the course is that in a guided setting, all systems must be failproof. If a single monolith tree would typically suffice as a top rope anchor, we must use two monolith trees. Our backups need a backup. The reasoning is obvious: as guides, we are responsible for the lives of ourselves and our clients and no room for risk is acceptable.

But if guiding involves a methodical process of self-preservation, then DEI work is the exact opposite. In



Moa Hedegard tackles New Yosemite (5.9) as the light fades at Junkyard Wall. August 28, 2021 - New River Gorge, West Virginia.



DEI work, we're intentionally putting ourselves at risk for the benefit of others. Whether speaking up on the behalf of the marginalized or in advocating for our own affinity group, this kind of work can have consequences. Social ramifications, pushback in workplaces, or fear of going about this work in the wrong way are common reasons individuals shy away from addressing issues of diversity and inclusion. In guiding we systematically assure our safety and success by utilizing standardized techniques. In affinity work, no such pre-determined pathway for success exists, but it's essential all the same.

A few years ago, Jun put her own inclusion work into practice after realizing that the climbing world needed more women. She started where any millennial might: with social media. "It was just an Instagram to hype up my girlfriends. It was never meant to be more than that," says Jun of Flash Foxy. (Although flash is a climbing term referring to ascending a route on the first try, Jun admits the name is tongue in cheek - meant to sound a bit risqué to those unfamiliar with climbing jargon. It's indicative of Jun's no fuss, barriers to the wayside attitude towards affinity work.)

But it soon became clear to Jun that more was needed. Jun told the AMGA, "I kind of think you should be doing this work, but if you're not, then we're just gonna start doing it." Since its

inception, Flash Foxy has transformed into a nationally reaching womens and genderqueer community support organization. By providing scholarships and other educational opportunities to women and genderqueer folks, Flash Foxy is getting climbing knowledge into the hands of those who might not otherwise have access to it. They also host an annual climbing festival, which returned in March after a two year COVID-19 hiatus. To give you an idea of their near instant popularity, Flash Foxy's second annual climbing festival sold out in just one minute, with over 800 individuals placed on the waitlist. It's clear the outdoor recreation world is thirsty for this kind of organization.

Beyond founding Flash Foxy, Jun holds a Masters degree in Urban Planning, serves as a board member of the Access Fund, and was named one of 40 women who have made the biggest impact in the outdoor world by Outside Magazine, among other credentials. Her work is also featured in the 2017 REI film, *Within Reach*, which includes climbing greats Lynn Hill, Nina Williams, and Cedar Wright. Jun seems to effortlessly weave her personal interests with community need, demonstrating that we are all capable of making an impact in our own unique sphere. Despite the fact that Jun is a powerhouse do-it-all sort of boss lady, she's quick to acknowledge her limitations and give a hand up to anyone who wants to contribute



to affinity work. "If you're passionate about something, then you should go do that—I'm busy!" says Jun.

In the end, a lot of us seem to be here to prove something -- to show that people who look like us are just as capable as the rest. Looking at the AMGA's website it isn't hard to see why. One webpage shows forty-eight members of the national instructor team. Only five are female. Even fewer represent people of color.

To the AMGA's credit, both the President and Vice President of the Executive Board are currently female, meaning women make up exactly half of the four person executive committee. The AMGA also recently created a Diversity, Equity and

Inclusion Manager role within the organization in order to better serve and support these types of objectives.

So together we're on a mission to increase representation in the outdoors, starting with ourselves. DEI work is not easy, and unlike climbing, there is no guidebook or standardized path for achieving success. It feels more like charting a first ascent: lots of trial and error, and sometimes painful missteps. But as Dr. Flores alludes, we must continue doing the work, accepting that it will be a mixed bag of successes and failures.

Citing colleague Donna Mejia, Flores says that in order to reach the summit, we must be willing to "fumble forward."

Ryan Ernest

Left: Avery Park (front) and other participants of the Women's Affinity SPI course practice rope ascension techniques.

Right: Skills and Scenery.

Photos by Ryan Ernest & Nina Kendall.