

# *The* Pitch

JANUARY 2020 | FREE | THEPITCHKC.COM

*The  
Kansas City  
climbing  
community  
is scaling  
up.*

BY EMILY COX

*RENTING IN KC  
JUST GOT A LITTLE EASIER*

*WELCOMING HOME  
THE GREETING COMMITTEE*





Up the walls at ROKC North. © CHASE CASTOR

# AT SCALE

ALL STRAPPED IN FOR THE GREAT KANSAS CITY CLIMBING RENAISSANCE. BY EMILY COX

If, a year ago, you drove past the low-slung, red-brick building that today houses Sequence, you'd never have guessed that, soon, all day long, people would be learning how to scale boulders inside it. But to Graham and Dara Hess, co-owners of the climbing gym, this Crossroads structure was worth moving all the way from Utah for.

"We sifted the country for this building," Graham says.

The couple—avid climbers—had been living in Salt Lake City for over a decade, working grown-up jobs in marketing and law. But they longed to open their own climbing gym. The only question was where. So they started touring potential cities—a process that took two years in all. They looked in Omaha, Orlando, Memphis, Indianapolis. They wanted a downtown location, a place where people could walk and bike, and where real estate was still af-

fordable enough to run a viable business. Eventually, Graham made his way to KC for a visit and spotted a promising building at 1710 Washington, just a block west of the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts.

For Dara, who is from L.A., Kansas City seemed about as off the radar as she could imagine. "I was like, 'Kansas City? Where is that exactly?'" she says. But when she came out the next weekend and saw the space, she immediately understood. The brick, the light, a barrel roof providing just enough space to build climbing walls. It was the one.

"As soon as I drove onto the street," Dara says, "I was like: Holy shit, this is it."

The Hesses convinced the building's owner, who was planning to turn it into offices for leasing, to sell them the building. Then Graham called up Nick Orange, whom he'd randomly met two years before in Black

Velvet Canyon, in the climbing mecca of Red Rocks, Nevada, and asked Orange to be his head setter—essentially, the person who designs the routes at a climbing gym. Orange was working in Boston at the time. But he packed up and moved to KC.

"I knew that Graham was going to design the best bouldering gym that I'd ever see," Orange says, "and that's completely the case."

Sequence, the gym Graham has dreamed of building for nearly two decades, opened in February of this year.

Natural light pours in through the glass-paneled garage doors; despite being full of several continuous, angular climbing walls that rise to the ceiling, the atmosphere is airy. Plants are abundant. There are separate rooms for fitness and yoga. On a recent afternoon, a cluster of twenty-somethings stood around in soft, rubber-soled climbing shoes, looking up at a wall covered in brightly colored holds. "Left hand on that crimp," one climber said to another, in a bit of collaborative brainstorming. "Bump up your right."

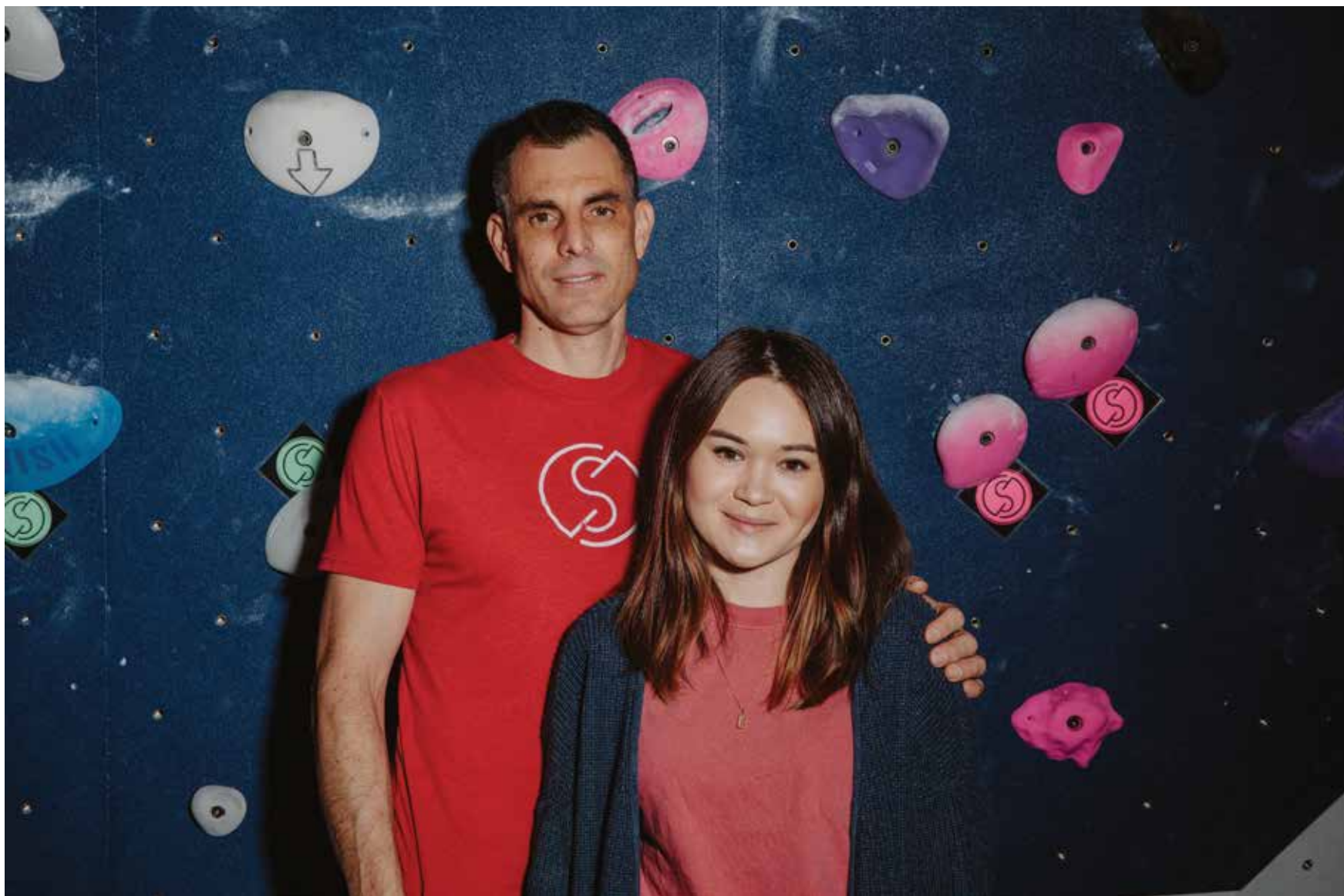
Interest in climbing is swelling all

across the country, owing to documentaries like the Oscar-winning *Free Solo* and the highly Instagrammable qualities of climbing gyms (they tend to be colorful) and the great outdoors (self-explanatory). According to the Climbing Wall Association (CWA), the indoor climbing gym industry, currently estimated at \$618 million, will be worth a billion dollars by 2021. This summer, climbing will be an Olympic sport for the first time.

There are now seven climbing gyms in the Kansas City area. Four of them, including Sequence, have opened in just the last four years. Comparable cities like St. Louis and Columbus have only four such gyms apiece. In December, the sport's up-and-comers and future champions competed at Sequence, as they hosted USA Climbing's youth regionals, the first time it's been in Kansas City.

"Kansas City was in a climbing deficit," says Andrew Potter, owner of RoKC, a local chain of climbing gyms. But, in recent years, "People saw a market opportunity and jumped on it. That's what I've done."

This month, Potter will open his third (and largest) gym in Olathe. Still, Potter



The Hesses moved from Utah to KC to open Sequence. © CHASE CASTOR

says, he regularly encounters Kansas Citians who are surprised to hear that running a climbing gym is a sustainable business enterprise.

“They look at me like I’m crazy,” Potter says. People tend to “think that I own, like, a plywood wall that I put up in my barn, and we throw a bunch of mattresses from an alleyway on the floor. But this is a legit operation. I’m going to have almost 100 employees this year. This isn’t a small company.”

• • •

**The confusion is** not totally unwarranted. Kansas City isn’t known for being near things people historically climb—such as a mountain.

And, in fact, apart from Cliff Drive and some boulders scattered throughout Swope Park, options are limited in Kansas City. One must drive at least a couple hours to find substantial rock climbing opportunities.

Still, there’s been a small but active community of climbers here for decades. The Kansas City Climbing Community

## THERE ARE NOW SEVEN CLIMBING GYMS IN THE KC AREA.

(formerly the Kansas City Climbing Club) formed in 1983 and gathered at places like the Westport outdoors shop Backwoods and a Salvation Army in Independence. (The group was permitted to build a climbing wall on the side of the latter, but the building has since been torn down.) Jim Grace, who moved to KC after a stint as a park service ranger out west, was an early member. This was before the internet; climbers found knowledge and camaraderie through clubs like KCCC. There were no climbing gyms in Kansas City at the time, because climbing gyms were not a thing anywhere.

“We’d climb roadcuts,” Grace recalls. “We climbed on the sides of people’s houses. Anything we could find to climb to train. A guy built an ice wall on the side of his house, he put up hay bales and flooded it and we climbed out there. I built a water-gripping system in a big tree and it would form a 20 foot ice column, and we would climb on that.”

Many members of the KCCC were also instrumental in creating local rock climbing routes. Route development might include looking at maps (these days, satellite imag-

es) to identify the location of new potential crags (climber-speak for an area of outdoor climbing), clearing trails, brushing dirt and moss away from rock, identifying climbable routes, and putting in permanent bolts and anchors for sport climbing.

In the 1970s and 80s, climbers were doing what’s now called traditional climbing, or trad. As they climb, climbers place gear to which they clip their rope intended to catch them if they fall. The 90s brought the spread of sport climbing, for which bolts are permanently affixed to the rock for climbers to attach their rope to. In the late 90s and early 2000s, Grace says there was an “organic blast-off” of new climbing as local climbers developed routes across Missouri.

Two prolific route developers were Jesse Gross and Jeremy Collins. (Collins was profiled by *The Pitch* in 2003, as he climbed on buildings downtown and underneath highway overpasses, trying not to get caught.) Gross first climbed when he was a student at Mizzou in 1997. “I instantly was completely addicted,” he says. Back then, the traditional way of climbing was to scale rocks with a mentor who shows you the ropes (as it



Sarah Kraly (left) and Andy Rhoades of the Kansas City Climbing Community. “It’s hard to climb in Kansas City,” Kraly says, “so we have to band together.” Opposite: Potter, of ROKC, now has three climbing gyms in the area. © CHASE CASTOR

were). “And he’d learned from his mentor,” Gross says. “It was almost like an oral history, or knowledge that was passed down.”

Gross and Collins teamed up in the early 2000s in Kansas City, exploring the area, mapping crags, and sharing all they learned via word of mouth, often at KCCC meetings. (Collins later produced the rock climbing guide book *Mo Beta*, the current go-to for climbers in Missouri.) Over time, they began to see more and more people at crags they’d pioneered.

“It felt good to have provided a place for people to go and climb,” Gross says. “All of a sudden, this outdoor climbing community started developing.”

Route development is still happening across Missouri, and even in Kansas, with adventurous climbers seeking out cliffs with new physical puzzles to solve. But while there’s a lot of rock in Missouri, it isn’t always of great quality. As Jim Karpowicz writes in the introduction to *Mo Beta*, “Judged by most commonly held standards in the rock climbing community—rock quality, access, climbing style, quality of the moves—Missouri falls way short.” For

### WHERE TO CLIMB INDOORS IN KC

#### **Ibex Climbing Gym**

801 NW S Outer Rd  
Blue Springs, MO 64015  
climbibex.com

#### **Monster Mountain**

9063 Bond St,  
Overland Park, KS 66214  
emeraldcitygym.com/monster-  
mountain-wall

#### **Apex Climbing Gym**

7200 W 106th St  
Overland Park, KS 66212  
apexclimbinggym.com

#### **RoKC North**

1501 Howell St  
North Kansas City, MO 64116  
climbkc.com/nkc

#### **RoKC Underground**

3150 Mercier St. Suite 641A  
Kansas City, MO 64111  
climbkc.com/underground

#### **Sequence Climb**

1710 Washington St  
Kansas City, MO 64108  
sequenceclimb.com

#### **RoKC Olathe**

654 N Central St  
Olathe, KS 66061  
climbkc.com/olathe

many, a big part of the draw around these parts is adjacency to Arkansas.

“There’s phenomenal, world class climbing in Arkansas,” says Graham. “For Nick [Orange] and me, that’s part of the excitement for us being here—that there’s this rad area that we get to help develop, and put up climbs and be a part of.”

Gross agrees. “You go to any crag in Colorado, and there’s just hundreds of people,” he says. But, “You can go to Arkansas and go to a world class climbing crag and have it all to yourself. And most of it’s really hard, really featured, steep, fun, gymnastic powerful climbing.”

Still, Collins—an old pro who estimates he’s created around 500 routes in his life (including 100 in Missouri)—is still at it in the Show-Me State.

“I thought I was done exploring scappy Missouri cliffs, then I visited Monegaw Springs”—it’s about halfway between KC and Springfield—“on a tip for the book,” Collins says. “I put a season of energy in there ... It’s so much manual labor to develop crags [in Missouri], and it’s great to find something that really felt worth the effort.”





Will Nagengast tries out moves on a recently cleaned and bolted climb in Missouri. © ANDREW CONROY

• • •

**Topographically, Kansas City** may be less than ideal for rock climbing. It does, however, have plenty of buildings inside which a person might construct a gym. The current climbing craze that has taken root in the city might, in fact, be credited to the fact that we don't have mountains. A 2015 article in *Climbing Business Journal* (it's a thing, launched in 2013) observed what it called the Midwest Paradox: People want to climb, but there isn't much in the way of mountains nearby. Thus, gyms grow in popularity.

Or, as Andy Rhoades, currently the secretary of the KCCC, says: "Our gym-to-crag ratio is out of control!"

Kansas City's first commercial climbing gyms, *Ibex* and *Monster Mountain*, both opened in 1995. Those were the city's only two climbing gym options for 18 years, until 2013, when *The Cave* opened in midtown KC (it was taken over by *RoKC* in 2018). In the early days of commercial climbing gyms—the first ever opened in 1987, in Seattle—they were a place for climbers to train in the off-

season. These people largely got into climbing because they were already spending time outdoors. "The way we came to climbing," Grace says, "is we started as backpackers and hikers, and then eventually got around to climbing. So we were comfortable being outdoors and taking care of ourselves."

These days, though, many people's entire climbing life is indoors. With the majority of new climbers getting their introduction at a climbing gym, Grace says, "A lot of these people—and this is not a criticism—they will come out of the gym, and they've never camped."

While there are no solid numbers on how many indoor climbers are also going outdoors, Graham and Potter estimate that perhaps 30 percent of climbers make it from gym to crag. And most experienced climbers will tell you that indoor and outdoor climbing are almost different sports, with different challenges, requiring different skills and mindsets.

Despite all the changes in the climbing landscape, KCCC remains a vital resource for new climbers. The organization hosts biannual climbing trips that welcome newcomers. Its fall trip in November 2019 drew around 30

climbers, about half of whom were climbing outdoors for the first time.

"The once niche that we fill that no other outlet fills," says Sarah Kraly, treasurer of KCCC, "is getting people from the gym to the crag, because it can be really intimidating when you don't know what you're doing, or you don't know anybody."

"We are serving the people who are new and need that foot in the door," adds Rhoades.

Both Kraly and Rhoades are examples of a new generation whose love of climbing introduced them to the outdoors, not vice versa. Rhoades had never been camping before her first KCCC trip. Kraly says, "Now I go camping like 30 days a year. Climbing has this byproduct of taking me to the most beautiful places I've ever seen."

But beauty has emerged inside gyms as well—particularly in terms of human relationships. Bouldering is especially social, as you're not tethered to one partner. "You get to hang out and talk, talk through moves," says Graham. "It's not competitive. It's a fun, collaborative environment."

The climbing gym, says Kraly, "is the last outlet where you can go up to strangers, and

it's expected and encouraged. People don't feel this anywhere else."

"It's hard to climb in Kansas City," Kraly adds, "so we have to band together."

• • •

**It's the Wednesday** afternoon before Thanksgiving, and *RoKC North* is filled with families. Preteens swarm over the bouldering area. Kids eagerly use the autobelays (contraptions built to lower you safely when you fall) in the tall wall area. A handful of what might be called serious climbers work advanced routes with practiced technique, but today is mostly for the beginners.

Making gyms accessible to novices has been an intentional effort on the part of gyms and industry manufacturers. Easier routesetting, well-padded bouldering areas, and autobelays have dramatically lowered the barriers to entry. If you can climb a ladder, you can scale the beginner routes at a climbing gym.

*RoKC* is particularly emphatic about being a family-friendly gym.

"Birthday parties are a huge focus for us," says David Van Volkenburgh, GM for



RoKC Olathe. “All youth programming is, because that’s what’s building the climbing community: kids who are getting into it at an early age and sticking with it, and it becomes their life sport.”

While RoKC North can get a little chaotic with all those children, its new Olathe facility is better designed to accommodate them. It offers child care so that parents have the option to climb unencumbered, and its two birthday party rooms have their own dedicated climbing walls—a decision also designed to help alleviate traffic on the main walls.

The Olathe RoKC is supersized for adults, too. (And seniors—some local climbers are in their sixties and seventies.) The North RoKC location has 10 autobelay; Olathe has 24. North’s climbing walls are nearly 40 feet tall; Olathe’s are 50. In addition to the climbing areas, Olathe also boasts 8,000 square feet of fitness activity—competitive, Potter says, with the offerings of any standard gym.

At the same time, he sees climbing as far more engaging than your typical workout. Going into a regular gym, Potter says, “Most people are like, ‘I have one hour, I’m a set my phone up, I’m a turn my show on, I’m a get on the treadmill, and count down every second.’ They never get away from this—” he mimes staring at a phone screen. “Go look through the facility right now and see how many people are hanging out on their phones. They’re not. They’re climbing, they’re engaging. Might be the first time in the day they’re not staring at a screen. The reason people fall in love with [climbing] is because you actually get focus pulled away from all the other garbage. This is a form of meditation.”

Graham at Sequence largely shares that view.

“If you’re not having fun, you’re not going to stick with it,” he says. “For the people that climb and stick with it, they love the movement—it’s infectious, they can’t wait to do it. They can’t wait to solve the puzzle. Maybe people don’t get that as much with counting to 20 with a weight.”

The physical breakthroughs experienced during climbing also often correlate to mental breakthroughs. After ten years of climbing, Dara Hess says, “I look at something and I say to myself, ‘There is absolutely no goddamn way I’m going to be able to do it— like, it’s physically impossible for me to do it.’ And then I do it. And that’s a breakthrough. Why did I limit myself mentally when physically I could do it? I just think that’s so cool.”

“For some, climbing will never be enjoyable,” says Potter. “But for those that don’t even realize it’s an option, climbing can dynamically change your life. You should climb just to know whether or not you should climb.” ■

New heights at Sequence. © CHASE CASTOR