

Member Spotlight: Crux Climbing Center

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In this member spotlight, we chat with Grace Nicholas, Head of Operations at [Crux Climbing Center](#) in Austin, Texas. Grace shares how the Crux team found success and grew from a single location to two, with a third on the way. The Crux Climbing Center team accomplished this by being reactive to their community through innovative gym design and operational choices while working hard to make climbing a more equitable, diverse sport with their expansive programming options.

This interview was edited for clarity and brevity.

Quinn Gordon, Membership Coordinator, CWA:

Great to be talking with you today, Grace! I was hoping you could walk me through the organizational history of Crux Climbing Center; how you got started and where you are at now.

Grace Nicholas, Head of Operations, Crux Climbing Center:

Crux became a vision in 2012 or 2014 as a place for Austin climbers to want to gather rather than just for training.

We had a location picked out and had to move it because of landlord issues. We finally opened in South Austin, our first location, in May 2016.

Then, in February 2020, we expanded our first location and were immediately shut down for the pandemic. From the beginning, though, we knew that we needed a second location just by the number of weekly emails we would get from people being like, "So when are you going to come to North Austin?"

So, we started working on opening our second location. We signed the lease for that in May 2019 and we were able to finish the remodel by August 2020.



Quinn Gordon:

I also understand you folks are also in the process of opening your third location – that’s quite exciting! Can you share any details?

Grace Nicholas:

Yes, when selecting our second location, we were originally looking for a tall climbing facility in North Austin, ideally one that we could purchase outright. We found our second location first but kept our eyes peeled for that North Austin facility. Eventually, we ended up selecting a site in Pflugerville. We should hopefully have the doors opening in 2023!

Quinn Gordon:

I know that you folks have a unique setup in your first location where a good section of your wall is reconfigurable. I was hoping you could chat about that process?

Grace Nicholas:

Of course! We have this wall called a future wall, and it works on a hinge system. Every year, we take it down and reassemble it with new wall angles, so it is completely fresh.

I like to say that it’s redesigned by our community. We basically will put up two or three different design options on social media for our community to vote for which one they want, and then we

build what they want. For example, there were a couple of years where the future wall was pretty steep, so the next year, everyone voted for the slab design option. Anytime folks complain about wall angles or difficulty, we always joke that they can vote to make it better next year.

Quinn Gordon:

You described that when you were envisioning Crux, you folks really wanted a place that the Austin climbing community would want to go to rather than just having a facility for training. Beyond the future wall, could you describe other ways you folks have worked to meet the needs of your community?

Grace Nicholas:

For better or worse, we have made communication *very* accessible with management, ownership, and everyone on staff in the gym. We're always gathering feedback from our members so that we stay connected with them to listen, hear, and make changes.

We're always trying to improve our services and offerings for the climbers at Crux, even on small items. For example, during the pandemic, lotion prices skyrocketed, and we stopped offering it for a while in the bathrooms. Well, we had people reach out to say that they missed the lotion, so we ended up bringing it back.

It is the little things that you can do to continue to get feedback and implement it. But keeping an open chain of communication is really important.

Quinn Gordon:

You folks have also worked to expand your community ties with adaptive climbing programming, correct?

Grace Nicholas:

Yes, we call it our BETA Program, which stands for Be Empowered To Ascend, which we started toward the end of 2020.

It's been cool to work with adaptive climbers of all different abilities, and we are lucky to be able to host the program four times a year. We'll have community volunteers do a training session and then help facilitate climbing for the adaptive folks who join us. Watching that group grow has been really rewarding and we are excited to be able to offer that program more at our next location in Pflugerville.

It's also been exciting to see how our non-adaptive climbers have embraced BETA. For every adaptive climber, we have two volunteers to help assist them. Because of that, it's like our whole community gets to be a part of the program.

Quinn Gordon:

That's awesome! How did you go about creating the program in the first place?

Grace Nicholas:

We are lucky to have an incredible lead instructor, Kristyn Olsen, who has an extensive background in that field, and we also worked with [Paradox Sports](#) for our first iteration of the program. We also have a staff member with guiding credentials who could help us with some of the more technical accommodations, so we are confident in the program that we run.

Quinn Gordon:

How have you benefitted from membership with the CWA?

Grace Nicholas:

We always have someone from staff attend the [CWA Summit](#) so that they can come back and implement great ideas. I think there is a huge wealth of knowledge to be collected and to learn from at the conference.

There are also aspects of membership like the CWA [insurance programs](#) that have been incredibly helpful for us.



The Crank'n'Stein event held at Crux Climbing Center. Photo: Merrick Ales

Want to learn more about insurance specific to your climbing gym? Check out our offerings for businesses in the US or Canada.

About the Author



Quinn Gordon is the membership coordinator at the CWA. Quinn is an active member of the climbing community and continues to hone his skills inside and outside the gym. When not on the clock, he can be found climbing in the Flatirons, hiking in the Rockies, or reading above the tree line.

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