

HANGING OUT

Dozens rappel off La Fonda in fundraiser for Girls Inc. of Santa Fe

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Caitlin Kontgis, left, a board member of Girls Inc., gets some last-minute pointers from Brandon Gabel, a rope crew volunteer for Over the Edge, during a fundraiser Saturday for the nonprofit. Over fifty people rappelled and raised at least \$1,000 each. Jane Phillips/For the New Mexican



Lisa Pounders, right, and Jennifer Edelson rappel Saturday down La Fonda Hotel at a fundraiser for Girls Inc. Over fifty people rappelled after raising at least \$1,000 each. Edelson raised over \$2,700. Jane Phillips/For the New Mexican

Skyler Garnett, 14, who has participated with Girls Inc. since 2011, gets strapped in by Brandon Gabel, rope crew volunteer for Over the Edge, during a fundraiser for the nonprofit Saturday. Garnett was on a team with her mother, Melissa Martinez, but ended up not rappelling. Jane Phillips/For the New Mexican

Learning the ropes was easy. Trusting them was another story.

Up on the roof of La Fonda on the Plaza, the 62-foot drop to the pavement didn't feel like a far distance. The process of preparing to rappel down the side of the hotel, one of Santa Fe's tallest buildings, was simple.

An attendant gathered participants — known as “edgers” — around a ladder and explained they would be harnessed into two industrial-strength ropes rigged to the roof. Each participant climbed some rungs of the ladder and practiced rappelling a few feet down.

The whole ordeal — a Saturday fundraiser for the nonprofit Girls Inc. in which 60 people raised or donated \$1,000 or more each for the experience — didn't seem like a big deal.

Until you were hanging over East Water Street.

One participant, 16-year-old Isabella Willard, who has been climbing and rappelling in the past, said she still feels an initial pang of fear each time she prepares to make a descent.

“Going off the edge is the scariest part,” the teen said.

But, she said, “I feel strong when I go down, like I can do anything.”

Helping girls develop that sense of strength and confidence is the goal of Girls Inc. of Santa Fe, the local chapter of a national nonprofit offering programs of empowerment.

“We always want girls to take positive risks,” said Kim Brown, CEO for Girls Inc. of Santa Fe. “This is exactly what this is about.”

Brown is afraid of heights, she said, and while the thought of rappelling down the building made her nervous, she wanted to show her daughter and others that she could overcome her fears.

“I've gotten stuck on roofs before,” Brown said, explaining her fear, “but I also felt like I wanted to take a positive risk. I was very excited that I took that chance.”

The harness tugged as an edger squatted into position at the roof's edge, feet brushing the side of the building. The first step is the hardest, edgers said, as they battled fluttering hearts and fear of heights.

As each step took them farther down the wall, a crowd of onlookers below cheered.

Within 10 minutes, each edger was back on the ground with a grin.

With a couple of curses and nervous energy, Julia Gay took her turn going over the edge.

“It was intense,” said Gay, a volunteer coordinator for Girls Inc.

The first few steps down were the worst, making her stomach lurch, she said. But in the end, she was proud to demonstrate that girls can do anything they set their minds to.

“A lot of girls are told they can’t do things like this — that they’re small, that they’re fragile,” Gay said. “This is a real-life way to prove those theoretical things wrong. ... You realize you can conquer your fears and be proud of yourself.”

Jennifer Edelson, a Santa Fe-based writer and legal consultant, was terrified as she inched down La Fonda. She called over to Lisa Pounders, a staff member at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, who rappelled down next to her. The two friends joked with each other as they tackled the adventure, supporting the message of empowerment.

“One thing I wish I knew when I was a teenager is that I’m strong, smart and bold,” Edelson said. “The younger you learn that, the more you’re empowered.”

“You can do what you want with your life,” Pounders added.

Gliding down the rope with speed and confidence, Army Staff Sgt. Emily Ferreira said she wanted to give back to the community and show that while she’s a soldier, she’s just like anyone else.

“I love any organization that helps young women realize their potential and that they’re strong and can do anything they want to do,” Ferreira said, “and don’t believe anything is just a man’s job.”

Girls Inc. of Santa Fe partnered with Over the Edge, an urban rappelling event organizer that provided the equipment, certified rope technicians and \$10 million event insurance for the rappel off La Fonda.

The nonprofit raised about \$60,000 from the fundraiser and looks forward to hosting the event in the future, Brown said.

“It allows individuals to have their own experience and give back to the community,” she said. “It’s been really neat to engage with the community and offer them a thrilling opportunity.”