

# A tree-mendous good time

## Recreational tree climbing an exhilarating experience

By Zach Urness  
of the Daily Courier

The idea of climbing a tree is, for many people, an activity that conjures up the carefree memories of childhood.

After all, who among us didn't have a special tree while growing up?

Those trees usually were found either in the back yard or in a nearby patch of woods or even at the town playground.

I remember the large oak I used to climb. The thrill of testing gravity for the first time and the little perch where I used to hide from my parents during dinnertime were just a small part of what made the experience special.

Eventually, though, most of us stopped climbing trees as we grew older. At some point, scampering among the branches in the warm sunlight became something akin to playing with toy race cars.

Some people never lose their passion for climbing trees, though. Take Viola Brumbaugh for instance. She simply takes her childlike-wonder to the next level.

In fact, Brumbaugh has turned climbing trees into a career. She's the vice president of New Tribe, a Grants Pass-based outfit that teaches recreational tree climbing.

The type of tree climbing Brumbaugh specializes in doesn't exactly fit the classic childhood memory.

The tree I climbed as a kid was probably 40 feet tall. If I had tumbled out of my perch, which was about 15 feet above the ground, I might have broken an arm, but not much more.

But I had a different feeling when Brumbaugh introduced me to the 170-foot tree we were planning to climb when I met up with her a few weeks back.

Before we set up the equipment, Brumbaugh knelt down at the thick base of the Douglas fir for a moment of connection — a sort of quick prayer of goodwill — with the tree.

"I like to take a moment to open myself up to the tree," she said. "It's a ritual that's both spiritual and pragmatic. It helps me center myself before the climb and is a way to offer the tree my kindness."

Another key difference in Brumbaugh's recreational style of tree climbing — a style that took root roughly 25 years ago — is that she uses ropes and harnesses that are developed by New Tribe.

To set up the ropes, Brumbaugh used a giant sling shot called the Rogue Sidewinder to launch a weight on the end of a parachute cord over one of the branches.

Brumbaugh quickly zipped up the line and had her husband, Rusel DeMaria, attach a harness — which looks much like a giant diaper — and a mass of carabiners and pulleys to myself and two friends.

Staring straight up at a 170-foot tree is intimidating. But DeMaria eased our fears when he told us there have been an estimated 10,000 people who've engaged in recreational tree climbing, and there have been no serious accidents.

"Well, not yet," I thought.

Cozy in my harness, I attached two pulleys to the rope leading upward, put my feet in the stirrups

and began the adventure up the tree.

It was at that time that I swung uncontrollably to my right, crashed into my friend Nate and nearly kicked his girlfriend Tiffany in the head.

After the false start, I slowly worked my way up the rope, inching one pulley up, standing up in the stirrups and then bringing the other pulley up to complete the motion.

The motion resembled slowly squatting up an invisible staircase, once I became used to the repetition.

At about 40 or 50 feet, I reached what Brumbaugh called the "ceiling," the moment you look down for the first time and feel an electric shot of panic.

The key to overcoming the fear, at least for me, was deciding to trust the gear and to swing out away from the tree, allowing the harness to hold me suspended in the air.

For the first time, I sat back in the harness and looked out across the horizon.

That day, the Rogue Valley was layered with a thick fog. But up in that tree, above the haze, the sun was shining. The valley looked much like a milky white ocean and the tops of the mountains became green, pine-tree islands.

The climb became easier, and eventually I reached the top and pulled

myself into a little brown hammock — a perch not unlike the one I enjoyed as kid, except I was about 125 feet above the ground.

As I sat back and enjoyed the view, Brumbaugh bounded up and down the tree, tying up gear and encouraging Nate and Tiffany slowly upward.

Nate eventually joined me in the hammock, and we ate a few turkey wraps that were strung upward on parachute cords.

Tiffany never climbed all the way up the tree, having grown slightly sick at the 50-foot range.

As the setting sun tossed an orange tint upon the milky white fog, Nate and I determined it was time to head downward.

The descent was far quicker than the climb. A small rappelling device called an I.D. was attached in place of the pulleys, and I shot down so quickly my stomach felt as though it was above my head.

The gear was slowly packed away after I reached the ground. Before we left, Brumbaugh knelt at the tree in an expression of gratitude.

"It's my greatest desire to use tree climbing as a way to connect people with old trees and help them learn that trees have many uses beyond wood products," she said.

"Trees can be a source of inspiration and rejuvenation. Tree climbing with our methods doesn't do any damage and is a viable use of a forest that's sustainable."

Recreational tree climbing is an experience that's both thrilling and relaxing.

Sure, it's intimidating at first to be 100 feet off the ground, but once you become acclimated, time almost seems to stand still among the branches.

And that in itself is enough to make you feel like a kid again.

For more information or to set up a climb, visit [www.newtribe.com](http://www.newtribe.com).



Nate Taylor carefully scales the 170-foot giant.

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Above, Viola Brumbaugh, the vice president of New Tribe and our tree climbing instructor for the day, works her way up the 170-foot Douglas fir. Below, Brumbaugh ascends ever higher.



As seen from the top of the tree, the fog-filled Rogue Valley looked like a milky lake. The green islands floating in it were actually hill-tops.

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