

CLIMBING TO NEW HEIGHTS IN FAUX FINISHING

-By Debbie Ellison

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Have you ever been so anxious or stressed out, you were "climbing the walls"? Well, that's no metaphor for Brad and Trey Johanson-Smith and Adrian Prelipceanu; they take the phrase literally. The three rock climbers own Adrenaline Climbing, an 8,000 square-foot rock climbing gym in Suwanee, Georgia, outside of Atlanta.

Okay, for them, rock climbing is a natural way of life. Hey, they live on the edge. Hanging from a mountain is *fun* for them.

Hmm, on the other hand, there's Alyson Smith, who has led a sheltered life in the big city. When she "climbs the walls"—at least until recently—it *was* a metaphor. She never dreamed, as a professional faux finisher, she would literally be climbing the walls. Alyson, of Paintin' the Town Faux in Alpharetta (Atlanta), Georgia, says this was the most unusual (and definitely scariest) job of her 14-year faux finishing career.

When she was asked to paint the 25-foot high wall at Adrenaline Climbing, she *wanted* to do it; after all, Brad is her brother and she wanted to support him, but, yikes! She's no rock climber, and, well, it *was* a little scary!

Of course, Alyson didn't actually scale the wall; she had a lift to hoist her to the top, but she says it certainly *felt* like she was a real rock climber.

"I felt like I was in the sky, working on mountains," she says. She admits it was a little "rocky" at first, and she took pride in being somewhat the daredevil, but it was rather uncomfortable. "I felt like I was really climbing a mountain."

Adrenaline Climbing has 12,500 square feet of total climbing surface. This faux finishing project involved the 6,500 square-foot wall in the back of the gym that the owners call the "cave" because it is an enclosed "amphitheater" with a roof and feels like you're in a cave when climbing it. It also includes a 22-foot slide and "pillar" in the middle of the gym.

Adrian, a native of Romania, was a regional rock climbing champion there seven years in a row. He was initiated into rock wall building when he built a climbing wall in the village where he was born. Because Romania is so mountainous, rock climbing is a natural part of the culture. No need for "faux" rocks in Romania!

Adrian decided his village needed an artificial rock climbing wall, so he got permission from the mayor, found a crew, got all the materials and labor donated, and built the wall out of sheer determination and ingenuity.

Completing the wall at Adrenaline Climbing was no easy task, taking six months from conception to conclusion. Adrian and Brad built the wall starting with a master design similar to a blueprint designed by an engineer who provided the measurements of the steel panels to be used and designed instructions on how the panels fit together. Brad says it is pretty complex engineering.

The actual building of the 25-foot high wall began with steel beams cut into pieces and welded into different geometric shapes called panels, which are then fitted together like a puzzle. This steel "skeleton" provides the foundation of the wall. The self-supporting panels are then welded onto the concrete walls and steel rafters on the roof. A scissor lift propelled the workers up and down the wall.

Wood is cut to fit inside each panel. The wood panels are attached to the steel with a nail gun that shoots huge nails and washers through the wood and steel to secure them. At that point, it begins to look like a wall.

Brad explains that most gyms stop at this stage, paint a base coat over the wood, and leave it at that. But Adrenaline owners Adrian, Brad, and Trey wanted the most authentic looking wall possible and decided to go for it. Making the wall look like real rock required a more complex procedure involving the artistic talents of several other professionals, including Alyson's.

“The best way to do this,” Brad explains, “was to use a concrete overlay and then have a faux finisher produce the texture and color of rock.” The overlay was colored a base color and troweled over the wood panels. It took Adrian, Brad, and six helpers to trowel on the concrete overlay. After the concrete partially dried, but while still wet, it was stamped to add texture. Ten different stamps, molded from real rocks, were used in random rotations to replicate the rock.

After the concrete hardened, Alyson’s job began. Riding up and down on the scissor lift, she began the massive job of faux finishing the walls. It took Alyson approximately five days, working ten hours a day, to finish the job. Because she was too exhausted to drive home a couple of nights, Alyson slept at the gym, which, she says, “felt like camping in the mountains.” Not a bad way to end a day of faux finishing.

Before beginning to paint, Alyson studied photographs of mountains and talked to real rock climbers at the gym to get the exact coloring and feel of a mountain surface. She also considered how the sun would reflect off a mountain and how the ground and sky would complement the coloring of the rock.

The wall already had the physical texture. To create the visual texture and coloring of rock, Alyson said she used Faux Effects® Aqua Finishing Solutions™ Aqua Colors mixed into Aqua Crème. Working from top to bottom, she randomly sprayed three colors onto the concrete overlay and sponged into the glaze, manipulating the colors to give the wall a rock-like color and look. Then, with a spray bottle, she sprayed water over the color to give it a “drippy, eroded look,” much the way nature works, as water drips down a mountain, eroding the surface and shaping the rock.

“After spraying 6,500 square feet of wall with spray bottles,” Alyson says, “my fingers were numb.” Ouch!

“At first, I was scared being up so high,” she admits, “like a rock climber would be the first time he or she climbs a mountain and looks down below.”

When the faux finishing was complete, holes were drilled, climbing holds were screwed into the wall, and, voila! – a climbing wall!

Brad says, “The end result was worth the huge effort we put into it because now we have one of the best climbing gyms in the Southeast. We’re ready for our many events—birthday parties, youth climbing teams, summer camps, classes, and individual and group climbing.”

For more information on rock climbing and/or Adrenaline Climbing, go to www.adrenalineclimbing.com.

For more information on “faux” rock climbing or other forms of faux finishing, go to www.paintinthetown.com.

After this “faux” rock climbing experience, would Alyson like to do it for real? Well...maybe not in this lifetime.

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