

Climber

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possible."

When she met Carr, she joked how it was either climbing the rock wall or sky-diving for her 85th birthday.

"I'm going to be honest, you picked the harder one," he told her. "One is going to take a year of constant training. The other is just somebody pushing you out of a plane and you pray."

Carr calls rock climbing a full-body sport. It was scheduled to make its Olympic debut at the 2020 Tokyo Games, which were postponed because of the pandemic.

"So many people try the wall and realize how hard it is and stop," Carr said.

Linda Smith, Johnson's daughter, can attest to that.

"I tried it for about two seconds, and it was a little more than I wanted," Smith said. "But my mom's a lot cooler than I am."

Climbing uses your core, arms and legs. It takes balance, agility and strength, abilities that can diminish with age. When Johnson started, she didn't have the grip strength to open a jar at home, let alone grab the handholds on the wall.

Still, because climbing is easier on the joints than other exercises and activities, it can be a good option for older adults. And it's relatively safe when done with a harness and rope system like the one at the Kroc Center.

Overcoming the COVID-19 hurdle

Johnson made it only a couple of steps up during her first lesson last November. Carr reminded her it would be marathon, not a sprint.

She needed a break around Christmastime, when she was busy making dozens of gingerbread cookies for family and friends.

"I got one of them, and it was delicious by the way," Carr said. "She was so into the Christmas spirit, so into baking, she wore herself out."

Johnson was then sidelined later in the winter with bronchitis.

But the quarantine proved to be her biggest obstacle, shutting down the Kroc Center in March.

No one was more excited when the center reopened in late June, and she was able to return to the activity she had grown to love. Carr worried the lengthy layoff would be difficult for her to overcome.

"I wasn't sure we could make the

deadline," he said. "But Johnson just clearly doubled her efforts."

She continued to build strength at home on her own, doing the stretching and other exercises Carr recommended.

"It's been amazing, and I don't care what her age is," Paul Carter, sports and fitness coordinator at the Kroc Center, said. "Seeing the joy she's getting out of this is what is inspirational."

Before each of Johnson's lessons, Carr sanitized the wall to protect her from potentially being exposed to COVID-19. In late August, she received an email reporting one employee and one guest had tested positive.

Johnson always wore a mask, which concealed her infectious smile and caused more frustration than the wall ever did.

"It's a real bugger," she said, her white hair pulled back in a ponytail. "I can't breathe as easy, and it keeps scooting up and interfering with my vision while I'm trying to see where my foot goes."

'If I can do it, anybody can'

Johnson made strides with each lesson. Carr focused on endurance and confidence as the birthday deadline loomed.

At one point, he brought in a ladder so she could more easily access the lower part of the wall and conserve her strength for the upper section. A small crowd gathered that day, cheering when she reached the top for the first time.

A couple of weeks later, she made it unassisted — with the Statesman Journal there to document her progress.

"If I can do it," Johnson said triumphantly, "anybody can."

Climbing has changed her life, especially in terms of upper body strength. She's standing up straighter, the kyphosis less noticeable, and she can open any jar.

"I'm getting twice as much done at home now," she said. "Instead of napping, I rest a minute and go out and start again."

She plans to continue climbing and hopes her experience might inspire others her age to stay active.

"I don't want to just sit and look out my window. I want to live," Johnson said. "I want other people to know that you can do these things. You don't have to just sit in the chair."

"Forward This" taps into the heart of the Mid-Valley — its people, history, and issues. Contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.

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Water

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Detroit's likely will cost more as the building that houses it was heavily damaged by the fire.

Detroit Mayor Jim Trett has had preliminary discussions with FEMA authorities about assistance the agency may be able to provide the city, but it could be a while until that comes.

"They said they may have some money to use to start rebuilding the plant," he said.

When fire crews returned to Detroit after the main fire, they had to bring their own water or pump it out of the lake to mop up fires.

Most of Detroit's water distribution pipes, which were moved with the city in 1952, were replaced a year ago.

Getting water to flow through those pipes again is one step, but making it safe to drink again will be important, too.

Marion County Public Works Director Brian Nicholas said he anticipates a mobile water delivery service once people can return to the town as a short-term solution, but a pumping system will need to be established soon, which FEMA has done in fire-ravaged cities in California in recent years.

"I do anticipate it will be something that starts out rudimentary and grows over time," Nicholas said.

While the impacts from the wildfire are felt on the water in Detroit, the impacts from the wildfires could be felt by more than 100,000 people who get their drinking water from the North Santiam River for the next decade.

"When the flames go out and the smoke goes away, for most people, they kind of stop thinking about fire," said Kevin Bladon, an assistant professor in OSU's College of Forestry.

"This is when all the problems start -- when the flames go out and when the first rain event of the year start moving that ash and the sediment into our streams, that really can have some profound impacts on our ecosystems."

The water ran dry in Gates

When he returned to Gates at about 3 p.m. Sept. 8 under skies that made the city appear as if it was midnight, public works superintendent Greg Benthin found the city's water system had gone dry.

Firefighters used the municipal water to fight the Beachie Creek fire to save what buildings they could.

The buildings that were destroyed were leaking so much of the remaining water, Benthin had to go house to house to turn off water.

But he didn't have to go to the lengths they will in Detroit.

"Our water plant's in great shape," Benthin said. "We had to run on generators for several days."

Despite having an advanced membrane water filtration system, it's still unsure if the water is safe to drink.

"Both Gates and Lyons-Mehama are sampling for (volatile organic compounds) this week," Oregon Health Authority spokesperson Jonathan Modie wrote in an email.

"Experience from (California) wildfires has shown that VOCs, particularly benzene, can be found in water systems that both lost pressure and lost structures due to fire, causing plastic pipes to melt or off-gas contaminants."

When customers in the Lyons-Mehama Water District were allowed to return Sept. 15, they were put under boil notices and told to conserve water.

The primary water storage tank in the Lyons-Mehama district on the Mehama side of the North Santiam is made of wood and dates back to the 1950s, but it emerged largely unharmed from the fire. The district has unsuccessfully been searching for funding to replace it for years.

Water quality impacts further downstream in Salem and Stayton

Salem has experienced problems with water from the North Santiam River before.

Salem draws its water from the North Santiam River east of Stayton at Geren Island.

In 2018, toxic algae blooms in Detroit Lake made the drinking water unsafe for some people in Salem due to cyanotoxins. Some blamed the blooms on runoff from wildfires in the forests in 2017.

To combat the potential for cyanotoxins reaching Salem's drinking water again, Salem is building a \$46 million ozone treatment facility. But that isn't expected to be in operation until the spring of 2021.

In the meantime, however, Salem's open-air water retention ponds, much like Stayton's, had to filter out ash from the water for a week.

Salem has put out multiple updates assuring people its water is safe to drink in the aftermath of the wildfires. The city has filtration systems, and it can switch to stored water if runoff proves problematic.

"Water systems served by surface water, like Salem, and with significant burn areas in their watersheds may experience increased runoff from erosion in the burned area, increased sediment and turbidity, increases in organic carbon and nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus, possibly leading to algal or cyanobacterial growth, all of which can create challenges for treatment," Modie said.

Future impacts on the water supply

One of the main pushes to recover from wildfires in the past decade has been revegetating the banks of rivers and streams as soon as possible after the fires are extinguished.

Those plants help the water that eventually flows into streams like Rainbow Creek and Mud Pappy Creek, from which Idanha draws its water.

"I think it's all going to depend on what we see later this fall and winter," Bladon said. "If we stay really dry and we're able to get some establishment of vegetation on those hillslopes, we might be able to mitigate some of those impacts."

"If we get a really wet fall and wet winter, a lot of that is going to be mobilized into that river."

The water bodies of Canada around 2016's Fort McMurray Wildfire are still feeling the impacts of the fire that burned nearly 1.5 million acres.

In the four years since, significant increases in ash, potassium, nitrogen, calcium and heavy metals including lead have been seen every time a significant rain has occurred, according to a 2020 study, and it has been difficult to manage bacteria in the Fort McMurray water reservoir.

Though its drinking water has remained safe to drink, the cost of treating the water has risen by 50%.

The impacts on water quality from wildfires can last a decade, according to Oregon Department of Environmental Quality spokesperson Jennifer Flynt.

"Depending on the fire location and severity of impact to the treatment and distribution system, over the long term post-fire impacts can be detrimental to drinking water supplies and treatment systems," Flynt wrote.

Flynt said there is also potential for toxic chemicals to appear in water bodies such as cyanide and mercury, which can be found in fire retardants.

"We're certainly not through this yet," Benthin said.

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