

The Driftwood, September 2009

SSI Foundation at Work in the Community By Pat Burkette

With the help of a grant from the Salt Spring Island Foundation, Salt Spring's Climbing Wall, known as "The Wall," can continue to build bridges, acting as a place where both the brave and the fearful can build trust, gain self-esteem, and make friends while having fun.

The Wall, hosted by Salt Spring Island Community Services (SSICS), is located in a tall, narrow building behind the Community Services building. It includes four 24-foot climbing surfaces, nine belay set-ups, and features like chimneys, overhangs, and bouldering.

When The Wall was built by the community in 1995, under the leadership of Jack Rosen," says SSICS Community Resource counselor Jamie Alexander, "there was no public recreational facility on the island."

Now, The Wall accommodates regular belay safety and training courses, kids' birthday parties and summer climbing day camps, as well as weekly public climbing sessions on Thursday evenings and Sunday afternoons and evenings. The Wall also serves school groups, PARC Camp Colossal, training for the Fire Department and Search and Rescue, Gulf Islands Families Together recreation, and private business groups.

Like many of our community programs, The Wall operates on a shoestring budget. It's volunteer-run and charges minimal fees--\$70 to climb all year, or \$11 for a drop in, with climbing equipment included.

So with paint flaking and peeling on the huge hand-painted sun on the back of The Wall building, and bare plywood on side walls exposed to the weather, SSICS's Joanne Van Pelt appealed to the Salt Spring Island Foundation for funds to help with badly needed painting and maintenance, and received a grant in 2008. The Foundation, which provided \$113,000 to worthy community groups in 2008, prides itself on looking at the bigger picture when it awards funding, so that a great variety of community needs can be met. Van Pelt is glad it does. "The Foundation grant," she says, "helped us ensure this community-built building will continue to be an asset in the community."

Aron and Kim Dalton and their daughters Bailey, age 14, and Kya, age 16, are Wall regulars who hope others will discover that asset. "My kids and I were looking for something to do together and we thought this would be fun," says Aron, who soon became one of the Wall's dedicated volunteers.

"The Wall is a fairly small space," says Aron. "But there are about 40 climbs there, for all climbing levels. We can always use more volunteers to help out, and volunteers receive free climbing. We will provide you with techniques to give you confidence." Aron says he puts the expertise he's gained through rope work at the wall to use in his construction jobs. "It teaches you a lot of useful safety stuff."

Jamie Alexander says that on one level, learning to climb is a fun thing to do. On another level, it helps people make connections, and he's found it helpful when working with at-risk youth. "Taking risks builds self-confidence. Climbers also learn how to give positive support to other climbers, and can learn about reaching goals. On The Wall, you can see progress by inches."

You can contact SSICS at 250-537-9971 for more info about The Wall.