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Life is a Climb

The story of three rock-climbers by Katerina Mihailidis





My name is Katerina Mihailidis and I am a senior, studying Journalism and French at Oakland University. I have a passion for writing and everything French! Telling people's stories is a big part of my work as a journalist.

I was introduced to rock-climbing about two years ago. What I love most about the sport is the community of climbers found at any climbing gym. Goofy and laid-back, people with backgrounds of all kinds will find themselves at a climbing gym and I'll find them. Time spent at the gym is never a bore.

As a passionate rock-climber myself, my goal is to tell the stories of three different climbers: Keennan Visga, Dereck Watson and Gabriel Lancaster. The three men, driven by their passion to rock-climb had a chapter in their lives where they let go of everything and just climbed, creating three unique and personal stories. Their stories are tales of self-discovery and a way for each of them to find themselves and become stronger as men, mentally and physically.

For every climbing term unknown, please find an explanation in the back of the book!

COVER ART: Pictured on the cover is the start-hold of an advanced rope-route for rock-climbers.





Keennan Visga's started climbing on May 30, 2017. He remembers the exact date his life changed. In the picture, Keennan descends from climbing a rope-route.



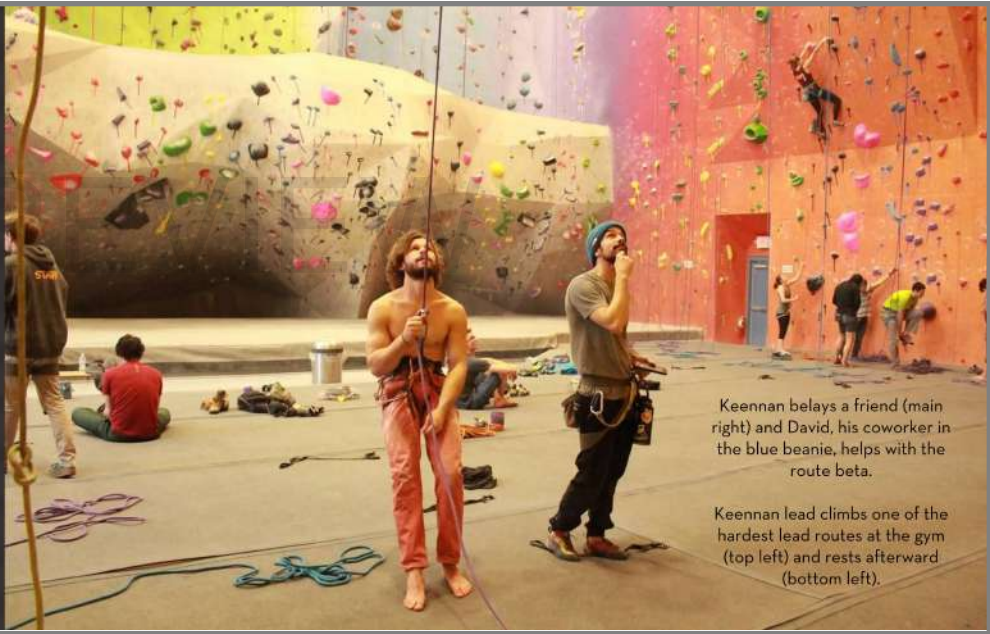
Keennan is always at the climbing gym. He boulders (bottom left), lead climbs (main right) and belays other climbers (top left).

After being first introduced to the sport, he climbed eight to nine hours a day, five to six days a week.

After two and a half months, he bought a van to live in and moved to Kentucky to the Red River Gorge, a very popular climbing destination. Down at "the Red," as climbers say, Keennan stayed at Migel's Pizza, THE base-camp for climbers.



Keennan stayed at "the Red" from August until November, after which he returned to Michigan for the winter. He got a job as a climbing instructor at Planet Rock, in Madison Heights.



Keennan belays a friend (main right) and David, his coworker in the blue beanie, helps with the route beta.

Keennan lead climbs one of the hardest lead routes at the gym (top left) and rests afterward (bottom left).

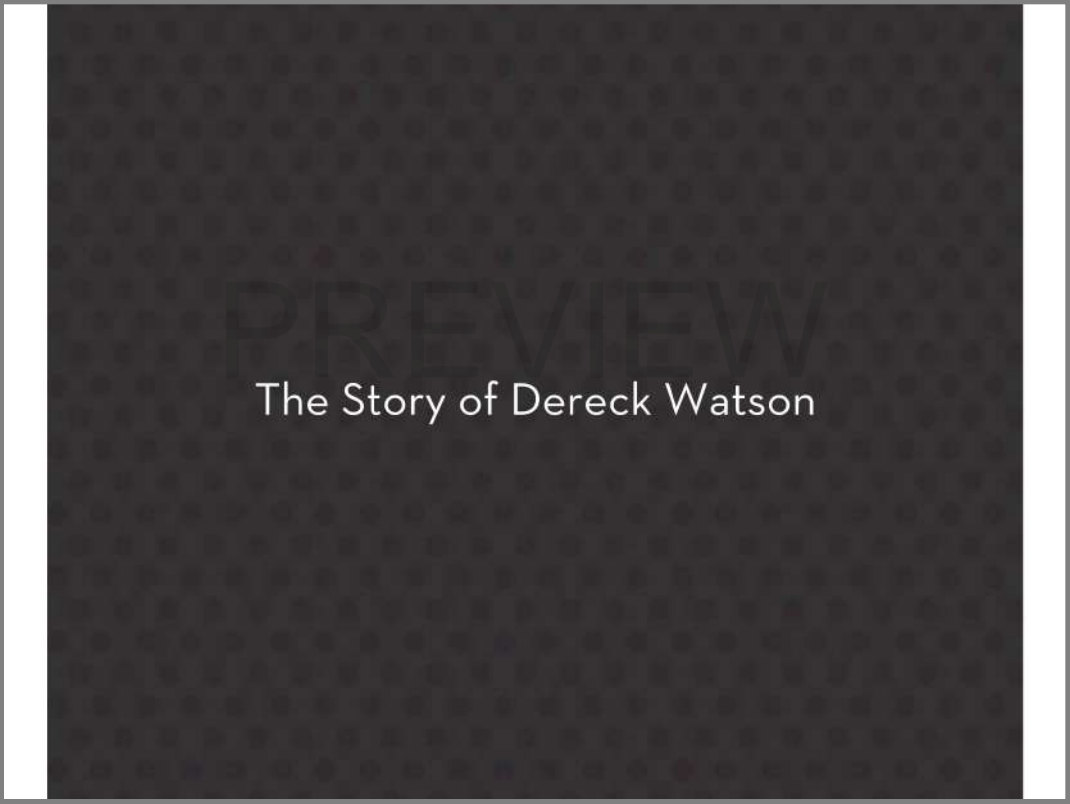






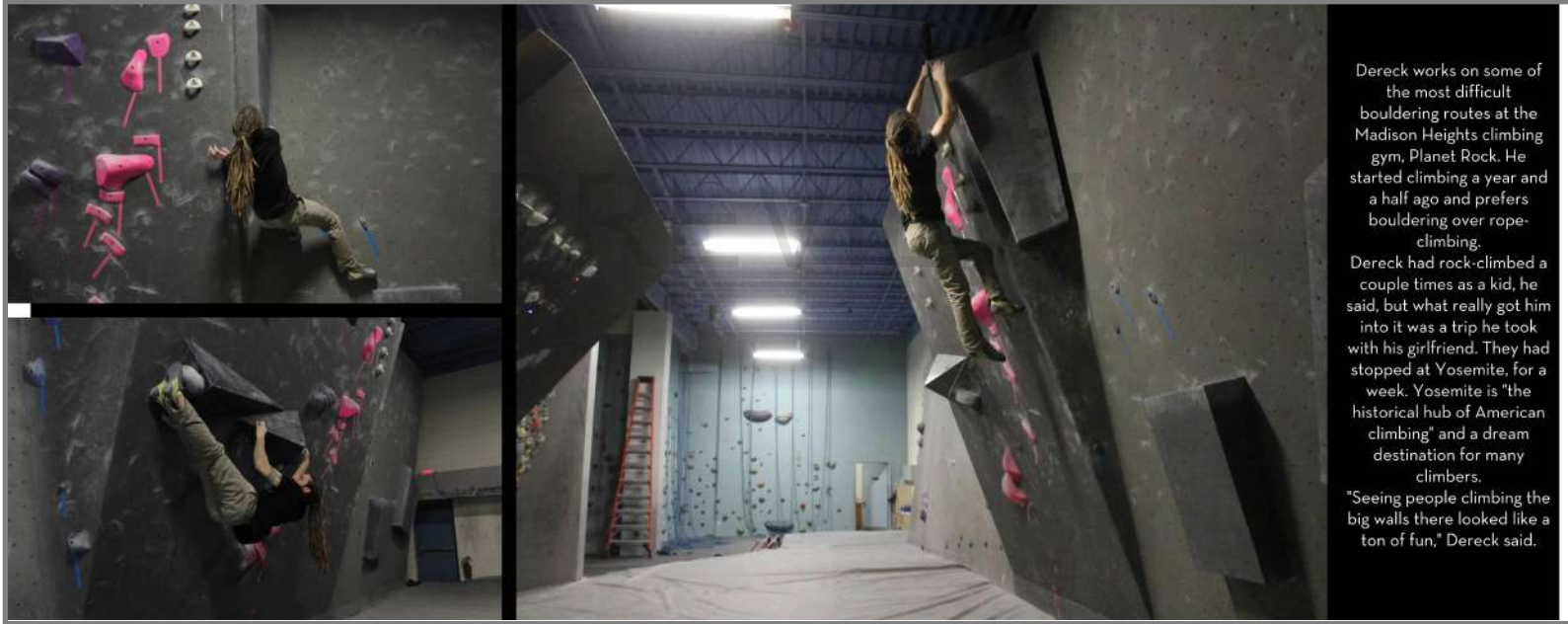
Keennan is listening to his friend Lauren Leming's story. After a long day of climbing, Keennan likes hanging out by the fireplace in Planet Rock's lobby with friends. A great listener and conversation partner, Keennan is frequently surrounded by other climbers.







Dereck Watson is a climber, a mineral collector and part-time jeweler. He is currently starting a Real Estate Investment partnership with his father-in-law. Once an avid skateboarder, Dereck's focus now lies on his investment, jewelry making, gem collecting and climbing.



Dereck works on some of the most difficult bouldering routes at the Madison Heights climbing gym, Planet Rock. He started climbing a year and a half ago and prefers bouldering over rope-climbing. Dereck had rock-climbed a couple times as a kid, he said, but what really got him into it was a trip he took with his girlfriend. They had stopped at Yosemite, for a week. Yosemite is "the historical hub of American climbing" and a dream destination for many climbers. "Seeing people climbing the big walls there looked like a ton of fun," Dereck said.

Dereck loves outdoor bouldering. His first outdoor trip at Horsepens 40, Alabama and Stone Fort Bouldering, Tennessee, in February, 2018, was a success. With original plans to solely climb in Tennessee, the rain led him to Alabama where he conquered difficult routes with his friends.

"Climbing outside was 100 times more fun than climbing in the gym. It completely changed the type of routes I spend my time on in the gym. I am definitely looking forward to getting back outside and climbing on some real rocks soon."

Outdoors, the rock is rough on the hands and routes are more difficult.





Dereck is a jeweler and a gem collector. He started making jewelry four years ago and since then has made many high end pieces of jewelry. His workshop stations are at his own house in Detroit. On a good day, Dereck will spend 8 to 15 hours working on his jewelry.



"I have found it to be the best expression of my style of design. I also love how timeless the things you make in gemstones and metal can be if constructed properly," Dereck said.



Dereck has a few hundred gems in his collection, gems which he uses to make jewelry pieces.

Some gems are more precious to him than others.

Dereck's dream is to one day portray his work in a gallery, a little show of his own. He wants to go off the grid for several years and not sell the pieces he makes until he can exhibit them.

"I hope to spend my last years sharing my life collection at a few big gem shows around the world."

Pictured above Dereck holds a pure silver crystal (left). It is the only piece he has ever seen where the silver grew in a crystalized shape.

He said he will probably not ever use that in jewelry-making.





Gabe Lancaster is a rock-climber, tree-arborist and nature enthusiast.



Gabe started climbing in 2016. He instantly fell in love with the sport and found himself climbing three days a week for two to four hours each time.

Within a year, Gabe was able to climb advanced routes at the climbing gym, routes which take other climbers years to do. Gabe recently injured himself while climbing and having taken off from the sport several months, he is slowly getting back into it.

Gabe loves plants, the outdoors and uncommon animals. He owns chickens, dart frogs, a chameleon and will soon be adding bees to his collection.





Gabe's hobbies include gardening and outdoor activities. In the picture above, Gabe shops for orchids at Michigan Orchid Society's annual orchid show and sale, Sunday, March 25, 2018. Gabe has set up a terrarium at his house where the orchids, the dart frogs and the chameleon coexist in the perfect conditions.

Glossary

Rope Climbing: a kind of rock climbing in which the climber wears a harness with a rope tied to it. The routes are longer, requiring the climber's endurance. There are two people involved in rope climbing; the climber and the belayer. There are two types of rope climbing: top-rope and lead climbing.

Lead climbing: the climber wears a harness with a rope and clips the rope into the wall as he/she climbs upward. In lead-climbing the falls are more dangerous.

Top-rope climbing: typically for beginners, this kind of climbing has the climber tied into the wall. The climber doesn't have to do anything but climb up.

Belaying: the act of assisting the climber up the wall and keeping him/her alive. The belayer will catch the climber if he/she falls.

Bouldering: a type of climbing that does not require a rope. The climber works on shorter routes that often demand core-strength and technical skill.

Beta: the advise climbers give to each other to help on another climb a route. Climbers can receive and give beta. Beta is often what will bring climbers together.

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