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ON THE ROPES

Local man's climb takes a dangerous turn after he is stranded on cliff face

By Ashley Meeks Sun-News reporter

Article Launched: 01/06/2008 12:00:00 AM MST

To view a SummitPost guide to hiking in the Robledo Mountains, click [here](#).

RADIUM SPRINGS — It happens to every hiker. The steep steps beckon you to scramble up, see how far you can go, see what the swooping finches see. At some point, without ropes, you're stuck.

And sometimes, finding you can ascend no further, you discover descending is out of the question, too.

Las Cruces Kevin O'Donnell, 60, learned that the hard way Saturday morning when he scaled 50 feet up into the steep crevice of a box canyon off Faulkner Canyon — and found himself up against the cold rocks and unable to see a way down. Stuck.

With their iron-dusted washes and pale lavender rocks, the Robledo Mountains are a familiar hike for O'Donnell and his weekend hiking group. O'Donnell wasn't the first, or the last, to be tempted by the 200-foot cliff walls.

Grady Viramontes, a coordinator with Organ Mountain Technical Rescue Squad, said the team gets called out once a month on similar emergencies region-wide.

And on another Sunday venture, in November 2001, Las Cruces restaurateur Mike MacHatton, 47, fell to his death at the very cliff where O'Donnell found himself trapped Saturday.

But this time, for O'Donnell, his hiking team and the two dozen rescuers — from the Radium Springs Fire Department, New Mexico Search and Rescue Support Team, the Organ Mountain Technical Rescue Squad and others — there was a happy ending on the ground.

"It wasn't part of the plan," said fellow hiker Don Pulliam. "He just got a bug in his ear ... I just think he thought he'd go up a little more, then just a little more."

Help came quick after O'Donnell realized he was stuck. A friend scrambled out of the canyon to get wireless reception and called for help and the Radium Springs Fire Department arrived at the top of the cliff, with a rope. That was enough to get O'Donnell down a few feet to a more stable ledge and keep him there. Fellow hiker Robert Yee, who risked climbing part-way to his friend with bottles of water while they waited for rescuers, said the situation was more serious than it looked from the ground. Stabilizing yourself against the cold, sunless rocks can sap your body heat and your energy, risking hypothermia.

The hiking group usually sticks to "Clark Kent stuff, not Superman stuff," Pulliam said, as rescue workers arranged a rope and harness system to safely bring O'Donnell back to the ground. "I think he's going to be downgraded to Clark Kent status from now on."

Jan Thune, another friend and hiker, agreed with Pulliam that none of the group imagined they'd get in a sticky situation like Saturday — and gently chided him for his risky behavior.

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"I'm sure when he comes to his senses, he'll be quite embarrassed," she said, watching the slow, deliberate rope work guiding her friend down. Minutes later, at around 2 p.m., she and the rest of the onlookers burst into cheers and applause.

O'Donnell's legs trembled after the hours of holding the cramped position among the cold rocks as EMTs checked his vital signs. And he was, as Thune predicted, feeling rather sheepish about his actions — and incredibly thankful for the coordinated effort to get him back to the trail unscathed.

"I think the amount of rescue they deployed, the technical people, getting me down, it was a pretty difficult set of circumstances and they did it safely," O'Donnell said. And he said he had learned something about limits from his harrowing adventure. "Always be with a group. If you get over your head and feel you're over your head, stop."

Neither O'Donnell nor his hiking group, who hugged and kissed him upon his return to stable ground, plan on halting their jaunts into the New Mexico wilderness. In fact, they've already planned their next outing — at O'Donnell's expense, of course.

"He doesn't know it yet," Pulliam said, "but he's buying us a steak dinner."

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