

One year after opening, Steep Rock Bouldering continues to extend outreach to Harlem community



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ALIYA SCHNEIDER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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In an effort to grow its outreach within the surrounding Harlem community, Steep Rock Bouldering—a climbing gym in the Jerome L. Greene Science Center of Columbia’s new Manhattanville campus—has continued to deepen its collaboration with local nonprofits and student clubs since its opening in 2017.

Since its inception, the 17-acre Manhattanville campus—Columbia’s \$6.3 billion and 14-year effort to secure much-needed space for its cramped Morningside campus—has faced criticism for its role in displacing residents and delaying its promise to uphold a commitment to affordable housing. The West Harlem Development Corporation, an independent organization tasked with spending Columbia’s commitment, has received \$10 million from the University to create and preserve affordable housing but, to date, has only spent \$100,000—or about 1 percent—of Columbia’s \$10 million allocation.

To increase the accessibility of Manhattanville resources to residents, Columbia designed the first level of the Jerome L. Greene Science Center as a retail space open to the public. So far, Steep Rock is the only operating business on campus, although plans are in place for Harlem-based [Dear Mama Coffee](#) to open later this year.

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Michael Cesari, the owner of Steep Rock, says the gym has made a concerted effort to appeal to undergraduates and the surrounding community through outreach programs for K-12 and college students.

“The primary work of our outreach right now is working with different student groups and giving them access to the space,” said Cesari. “It just makes sense. We want to have an active student user base here—we offer the Columbia Climbing Club and student body at large significantly discounted rates.”

Students from Columbia University Rock Climbing have been practicing at the gym since it opened last fall. According to club member Grace Palmer, BC '20, the proximity of the gym to campus has given her the opportunity to learn to climb, providing an easily accessible break from the stress of school.

“[Climbing] is a nice break from campus—it’s an athletic community and a challenging environment,” said Palmer. “Steep Rock is super close, and that makes climbing convenient given that we’re all so busy.”

Roberto Herrera, director of the Harlem Rock Club, spoke to the gym’s efforts to connect to the surrounding community. The gym collaborates with his organization, which has received grant funding from Columbia to offer rock climbing lessons to community youth. The club currently brings in student’s from West Harlem’s Hamilton Grange Middle School and teaches them to climb.

“We wanted to establish a rapport with the folks looking in and feeling like they didn’t belong,” Herrera said. “We wanted to say: no, rock climbing is for everyone—to get school kids and the general community in the gym to climb, not only as exercise, but also a potential route to experiential learning.”

The Harlem Rock Club has also worked with several nonprofits in the community, and has plans to expand in the near future. Brotherhood/Sister Sol, a Harlem-based nonprofit supporting primarily black and Latinx youth, currently sends neighborhood youth groups to the gym.

Chapter leader Frantz Jerome, who has also worked with FamilyWorks Harlem and sent local high schoolers to the gym this summer, said that he has seen the effect of climbing on young people. However, Jerome believes a lack of publicity is still preventing members of the West Harlem community from knowing they can access not only the rock club, but also the campus's resources as a whole.

“[Columbia] can continue to source out their resources to more of the community more frequently in more ways,” Jerome said. “Outside of seeing [the rock wall] in passing, I had no idea it was available to the public—there was nothing outright that said so. The Harlem Rock Club is still getting its legs.”

Despite the lack of awareness, Jerome emphasized that outreach programs from Manhattanville tenants are a good first step to connecting to West Harlem residents.

“Climbing is almost like a life tool in and of itself. For our young people, it's really insightful to have those experiences that they might not get otherwise,” Jerome said. “The building was built with a lot of push back—the community didn't ask for it—but if it's here it should be used. Having the rock wall available to the community is indicative of the beginnings of a step in the right direction.”

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