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Mrs. Cuclich

Language and Literature

28 February 2019

Dave "Sal" Decelles

*Sal has been an avid rock climber for eleven years and route setting for five. He has been working as a professional route setter for over four years. He creates routes and boulder problems for climbers at an indoor climbing facility. He currently is the route setting manager there and has been for the past two years. He ensures that the routes are safe, varied, and suitable for all user groups. Sal grew up in Connecticut and now lives in Chicago IL. He is 30 years old.*

I had to give up everything in order to have this job. I'll never make six figures doing what I'm doing, but it was all worth it. I would never look back. Ten years ago, I could never make it in the climbing industry. I'd be working at the front desk, making minimum wage, not able to support myself. Now I have a job with a salary, health care, and benefits. This industry has just exploded.

I started climbing 11 years ago and I fell in love with it immediately. Some of my friends were going to the local climbing gym and asked if I wanted to tag along. I was terrible at first. I couldn't even get up the easiest climb in the gym, but I kept trying. I kept going back and I kept getting better. I started doing climbing competitions at local gyms. I started winning those competitions. Winning felt good. In the beginning, my aspiration was to become a professional climber. Travel around the world for the sole purpose of climbing. I would make a living in the

process through sponsors and prize money. I soon realized that I started too late for that dream to come to fruition. I had already stopped growing and my joints weren't able to handle the stress of being an elite athlete. I used to take Advil before every session. It wasn't sustainable. As a route setter, sometimes I can get too comfortable because I climb everyday for my job. One day I pulled onto a hard climb I created without warming up. I didn't think much of it until I felt something happen in my back. It ended up being a severe strain to the muscles that meet behind my shoulder blade and the contraction pulled my ribs out of place where they connect to my spine. I stopped setting for a while because of my injury and bought a laser pointer so I could work while sitting on the ground. I know every single one of the thousands of holds in the facility and I know how it feels to grab them on the wall by looking at it. I know when certain sequences won't feel right even when the rest of my route setters don't because they don't have as much experience. So even though I couldn't route set, I still could in a way.

There are no climbing areas within a 3 hour driving radius of Chicago. When I moved to Chicago from Connecticut for my previous corporate job, there were no climbing gyms there either. I was planning on opening a climbing gym with my brother-in-law as an investment because there wasn't a single one. Then in 2015, Chicago got its first. I went into the gym a couple weeks after it had opened and one of my friends from home was the route setting manager there. I asked him if I could route set for the gym and I got the job. I realized I didn't like my corporate job as much as I liked route setting, so I quit and started setting full time. That was 4 years ago and now I'm the route setting manager at that same gym.

As the route setting manager, at the beginning of the week I tell all the other route setters on my team what section of wall we are resetting and on what days. We change the routes one

section at a time, and cycle through all the sections every 1-2 months. We maneuver up and down ropes to screw plastic climbing holds on the 50-foot tall wall. The climbing holds we use fundamentally imitate rocks that would be grabbed on a rock climb. It's a pretty laborious process. I have to carry all of my gear and holds with me and I could be in the air for hours at a time, not to mention the danger of dropping equipment on people below us. After we put the routes on the wall, we test them to see if they are fun, flow well, and work for most of the people at the gym. There are so many people I have to keep in mind while I set. Short people, tall, color blind, and older. I could easily make a climb that is significantly harder or impossible for one of these groups. If that happens, people won't want to come back to that climb or to this gym. It's bad for business at a fundamental level. The opposite is also true. If the person has a good experience, they will come back to the route and become a better climber in the process.

People always ask me if we pre-plan our routes. That's impossible. The spacing is always different or a bolt that I wanted to use could be busted. Everything is done on the fly. I just put up what comes to my mind. It's a creative process since I am literally creating movements on the wall that may have never been done before. The people who set at my gym are also creative in nature. We have musicians, 3D designers, coders, and circus artists. They bring these other modes of creativity, positive attitude, and strong work ethic to their route setting. We all complement each other. My personal strength in my job is communicating. My passion for this job is overwhelming. I'm good at developing the routesetters on my team. I have worked with beginning route setters that have become quite good because they understand the movement. I believe that there are bosses and leaders. I am a leader. Bosses just delegate. I will do the work that I ask of my team. On the flip side, I don't have as much time for myself. I can't progress my

own route setting and climbing skills as much anymore. It's a little harder to stay motivated when I climb for a living.

At this gym, my team and I are paid properly for the work that we do. The company that I work for is one of the most competitive in the country and they pay their people well. This isn't the case in many other gyms. It's difficult. I also feel excited that the opportunity to have a career like mine has just become possible.

During my life I have lost a lot of close friends due to overdose or accidents. I went through a lot of pain and emotional turmoil in my youth. At one point I struggled with addiction. Through all these experiences I learned to let go and value the things that are important to me. In anything I do, I always put my best foot forward; even if I hate it. I learned how to get through a lot of situations by always putting my best foot forward. That way when I need to walk away from that situation, I can walk away with peace of mind because I know that I worked hard and did my best.

I always wanted a way into the climbing industry. I didn't know it would be route setting, but I just loved climbing so much that I needed to incorporate it into my life on a larger basis. Now my passion pays my bills. I get to do what I love all the time. There are always some difficult days, but those days are so few and far inbetween that they would never override the love and joy I get from doing my job and the people here. This is what it was for me; everyone has to find it.

Work Cited

Robertson, Melanie. Personal Interview. 15 February 2019.