

Faculty Spotlight with **Neal Alto**

How did you get into rock climbing?

I have been an outdoor sports enthusiast for as long as I can remember. I started rock climbing in 1993 in the North Cascade Mountains of Washington State and British Columbia. After climbing for about 10 years I needed a change of pace so I took up surfing as my major outdoor activity. However, when I moved to Dallas to start my faculty position the lack of waves inspired me to look for another outdoor hobby. I started climbing again in 2011 when my daughter showed an interest in the sport. Climbing, hiking and camping are now a family affair. This picture shows my favorite central Texas cliff.

What is your favorite trip or location you have rock climbed?

I have climbed in many areas of the United States and internationally. Perhaps my most adventurous trip from the past few years was when I attended a microbiology conference in China. I decided to take my rock climbing shoes on the trip and try out a few of the gyms in Shanghai and Beijing. It was at one of these gyms that I met a local climber named He Chuan, or “River” as he was called by his climbing friends. After a broken conversation in which I somehow relayed my desire to climb outside in China, River agreed to pick me up the next morning from the hotel. River is an engineering professor in Beijing and also one of China’s only professional climbers. I found out later that he is quite famous in the ice climbing community for making a remarkable film called Searching for Christmas Tree that can still be found on Vimeo (look it up to see his house and village). Riding in his circa 1980 Subaru Wagon I was struck by the enormity of the cliffs outside of Beijing in the Baihe mountains. After we collected the rope and gear from his house in a small mountain village, River and I climbed a 900 foot cliff that soared high above the valley floor. After completing the climb in the late afternoon, we had dinner at his house where his mother and father cooked us chestnuts and pork. After dinner, River then drove me to the closest town at the bottom of the hill where he hailed an “Uber”, said something to the driver, and off I went assuming we were heading toward Beijing. I will never forget the juxtaposition between the quaint mountain village and the bustle of nearly the largest city in the world separated by less than 50 miles. I will also not forget the hospitality of River and his family.



Have you had any gnarly accidents?

Fortunately, I have not had any major rock climbing accidents. I did, however, break my back mountain biking..... That’s a whole other story!

