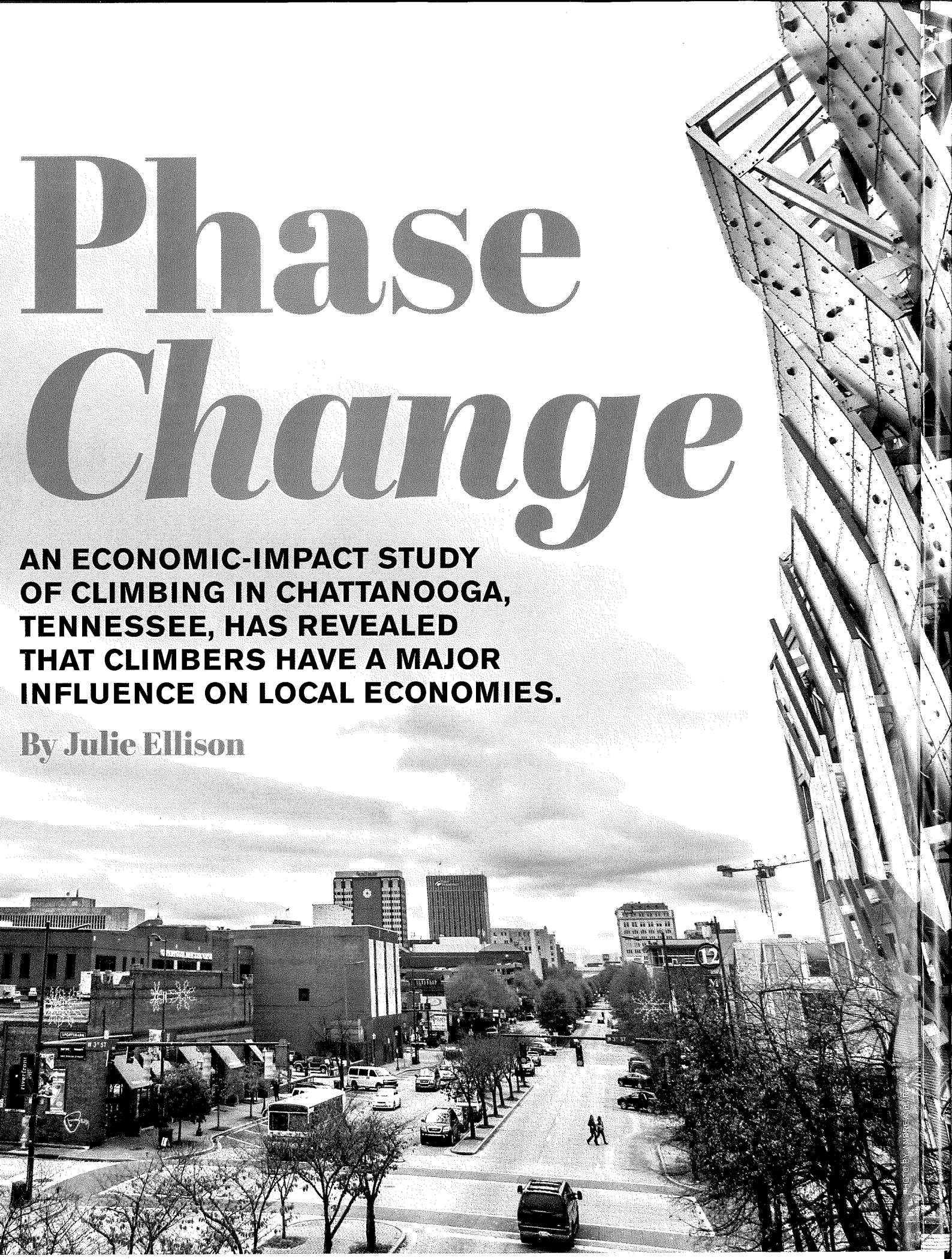
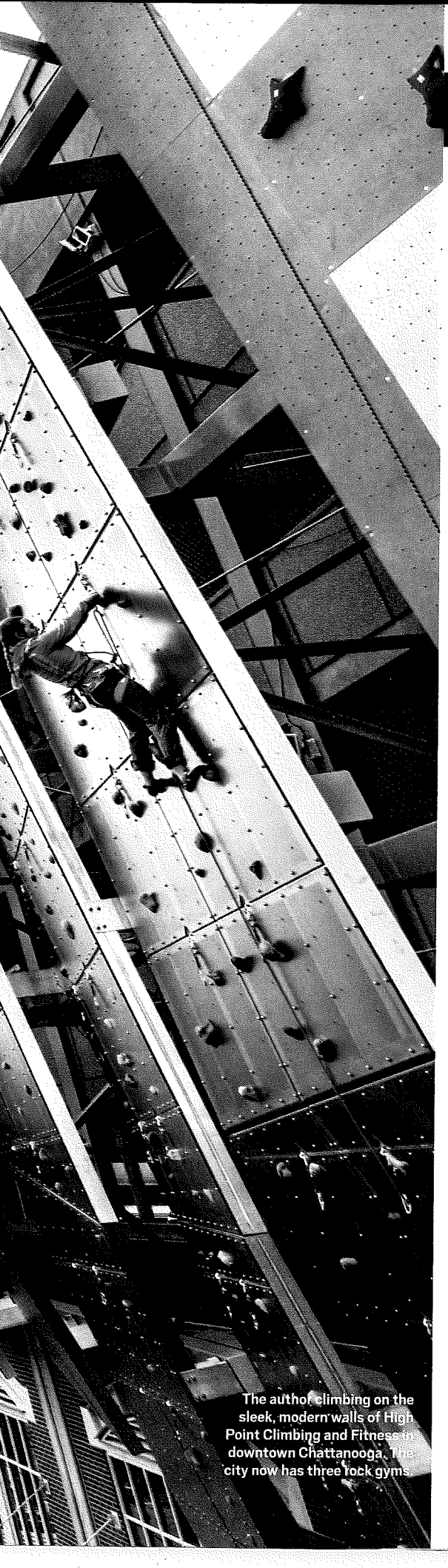
Phase Change

AN ECONOMIC-IMPACT STUDY OF CLIMBING IN CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE, HAS REVEALED THAT CLIMBERS HAVE A MAJOR INFLUENCE ON LOCAL ECONOMIES.

By Julie Ellison





The author climbing on the sleek, modern walls of High Point Climbing and Fitness in downtown Chattanooga. The city now has three rock gyms.

THE DIRTBAG IS A ROMANTICIZED CONCEPT, DREAMY BECAUSE OF ITS SIMPLICITY. WE THINK IF WE REMOVE THE TRAPPINGS OF MODERN LIFE–A SMARTPHONE, A HOUSE, A DECENT CAR, A FULL-TIME JOB–WE WILL HAVE ENDLESS TIME TO PURSUE ADVENTURES. BUT THOSE THINGS AREN'T SUPERFLUOUS TO CLIMBERS ANYMORE. THE DAYS OF BIVYING UNDER BOULDERS ARE OVER–OUR SPORT IS TOO BIG AND WE CAN NO LONGER JUST SKETCH ALONG.

A new breed of climber has emerged. She has a college degree, a 401(k), and career ambitions. She works as a doctor or a coder or an engineer. She pays rent or a mortgage, goes to the gym a few days a week, and gets outside on the weekends (or not). While this shift has meant forfeiting a certain rawness, the climbing community has also gained a power it never had before. Moving from subculture toward mainstream has given us a voice in political, environmental, and social conversations. We're being listened to because we're now seen as contributing members of society, not as transient ne'er-do-wells. Some of our authority is a result of our growing numbers, sure, but the real leverage comes from the one thing that must—or so say the purists, the "America's fit homeless" of yesteryear—be repudiated to be considered a true dirtbag: money.

From 1999 to 2003, Drew Bailey would drive from Crossville, Tennessee, to climb in Chattanooga every few weeks. He loved the sandstone of Sunset Rock and Tennessee Wall, areas that collectively offer several hundred single-pitch trad lines. He would spend his days climbing, then eat homemade noodles and sleep in his truck on the outskirts of town. He occasionally spent money on gas and coffee. "I wasn't going to pay $150 for a hotel," Bailey says, "and there weren't places for climbers to stay." In 2004, he and his wife moved to Chattanooga, where they got a job running an event facility on Lookout Mountain.

Nine years later, Bailey, who'd become Assistant Professor of Sport, Outdoor Recreation, and Tourism Management at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC), found himself in a meeting with the Chattanooga Visitors Bureau (CVB). In his academic role, Bailey had conducted economic-impact studies on events like Ironman and the Riverbend Festival, and he shared that info with the CVB. In that meeting, the topic eventually turned to climbers. The CVB said they realized climbers weren't the same clientele they once were—visiting climbers were spending money on hotels, tourist activities, restaurant meals, and goods from local shops, but the CVB didn't know how to measure it. In addition, many of those climbers were moving to the city permanently.

"Looking at the small community from [almost 8 years] of living in Chattanooga, I've seen the growth," says Cody Roney, executive director of the Southeastern Climbers Coalition (SCC). "I meet somebody that just moved here on a weekly basis."

Dozens of articles have heralded Chattanooga as a top outdoor town: *Outside* has twice named it the Best Outdoor Town (2011 and 2015), and *Blue Ridge Outdoors* called it the Best Outdoor City in

2012. In 2011, two climbers opened The Crash Pad hostel, and the area got its third climbing gym in late 2013 with the opening of High Point Climbing. With a low cost of living, growing food and culture scenes, a temperate climate, tons of high-quality rock, and the potential for opening new businesses, Chattanooga (pop. 177,571 as of 2016) has the amenities of a larger city without the scale and price. Sperling's Best Places cost of living index lists Chattanooga at 87.5, where 100 is the US average. For comparison, Boulder is 178, Bend is 132.5, Bishop is 123.7, and Fayetteville, West Virginia, is 84.3. These climbers fit the exact demographic of young professionals that the city wanted to attract because of their significant economic impact.

Bailey himself fell into this category. He ran the Lookout Mountain facility for a year before earning a PhD in Education: Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Studies from the University of Minnesota, and then working as an assistant professor in Michigan. In 2012, UTC hired him, and he was happy to return to the area. "The face of climbing is changing, and it can be reflected in me personally," Bailey says. "Now I have a career, a wife, and a kid. I'm still climbing, and now it's a family affair. The entire family needs to be happy, and that means more stuff, more comfort, and more entertainment."

Since the early 1990s, various Chattanooga organizations and businesses have invested in the region's outdoor activities—groups like the SCC, The Trust for Public Land, Rock/Creek Outfitters, and The Adventure Guild. In 2004, then-mayor Bob Corker launched the Outdoor Initiative, a plan to make Chattanooga an outdoor mecca through a standalone entity, marketing, partnerships, and programming. There had always been plenty of people championing the outdoor resources of Chattanooga, but the mayor's initiative gave it priority.

"It's a story about the people who loved the crags and trails and put effort in on the ground level long before the rest of us knew what we really had," Bailey says. "They came together to create a vision for the city." While this got the ball rolling, it wasn't until recently that climbers' contributions were recognized as significant drivers.

By 2015, Hamilton County, of which Chattanooga is the county seat, was making $1 billion a year from tourism, attractions that included the Tennessee Aquarium, scenic spots like Ruby Falls and Rock City, and sporting events. That September, Bailey and his UTC students started going to Tennessee Wall, Sunset Rock, and Stone Fort (aka Little Rock City) to survey climbers. The researchers went to the parking lots, tallying license-plate locations to see where they were coming from and asking climbers how much money they spent, where they spent it, how long they stayed, etc. The goal was to get concrete numbers for local business owners, residents, and city officials to see.

"Tourism is great until it gets annoying. We have to show people it's benefitting them," Bailey says. "We're making the argument that climbers and outdoor clientele tend to buy local. They're not staying at the Hilton; they're staying at the local hostel, so the money stays."

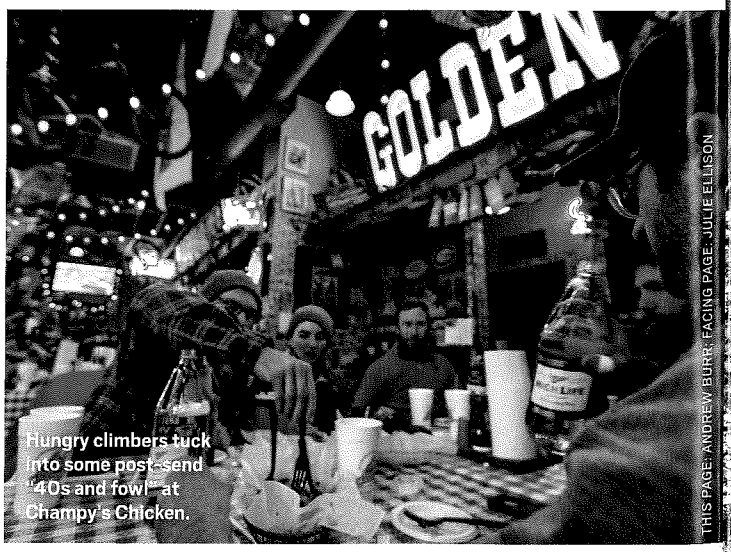
The economic-impact study found that visiting climbers (not including residents, whose spending is considered part of the regular economy) spent $6.96 million in Hamilton County during the 2015/16 fall and winter season. That total didn't include impact from areas more than 30 minutes from downtown, and it removed visitors who wouldn't pass through Chattanooga on their way to the climbing site. Foster Falls and Rocktown (in Georgia), both generally considered local to Chattanooga, have more visitors than any other area except Stone Fort. By extending the radius to include these two spots, the study estimated $10.3 million in spending (*see sidebar, p. 71*).

These numbers put dollars made from climbers on par with revenue from major special events held in Chattanooga, another boon for area tourism. Held in late summer every year, Ironman Chattanooga brings in $10 million, with the race occurring in one weekend and many of the participants staying up to 10 days. Another popular special event is RiverRocks, a multi-day festival that combines outdoor athletic activities with live music. In a similar economic-impact study conducted by Bailey, RiverRocks 2013, which included a 50K trail-running race and a music festival, had a direct impact of $4.1 million. In 2015, RiverRocks had nine events and a direct impact of $4.9 million, an estimate researchers called "very conservative." One event was the Stone Fort portion of the Triple Crown Bouldering Series, a three-part outdoor bouldering competition founded in 2003.

There are two major differences between these special events and the steady trickle of climbers over a six-month winter season. First, the numbers in these studies do not account for the cost of staging these events. In contrast, climbing tends to be self-supported, with little to no cost to anyone but the climber. Sure, there are costs associated with crag infrastructure (signage, trail maintenance, parking, bathrooms, etc.), but those funds tend to come from climbers and regional nonprofits. Similarly, a lot of the work hours required to maintain the infrastructure are done on a volunteer basis. Second, these events are held on certain dates in specific locations, often requiring entire blocks and roads to be shut down, which can be vexing for locals.

"The thing about climbers is that you don't even see them [when they're at the crag]," Bailey says. The dozen crags in the area spread climbers out as well. "For something like RiverRocks, you must measure the amount of frustration per day. How many millions is it worth to shut down whole sections of town for days at a time?"

A FEW MONTHS BEFORE Bailey began his study, researchers at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond had started a similar economic-impact study for the nearby Red River Gorge (*climbing.com/rrgeconomy*). They found that climbers spent $3.6 million in six counties, three of which ranked as the third, eleventh, and fourteenth poorest in the country. The most money was spent on food, totaling almost $2.3 million. Both studies also offered findings that suggest climbers are shifting to be more educated, with higher in-



Hungry climbers tuck into some post-send "40s and fowl" at Champy's Chicken.

THIS PAGE: ANDREW BURR; FACING PAGE: JULIE ELLISON

Hale Melnick on a V4 at Zahnd, one of the lesser-known sandstone gems in the Chattanooga area.

come levels. As the Red River Gorge study reads:

"Finding two: Demographic data contradicts prevailing climber stereotypes. Prevailing myths about rock climbers often suggest they are uneducated, unemployed, and contribute little to the local economy. However, over half of respondents ... have college degrees and one fifth ... have terminal degrees such as doctorates. Most of those who do not have college degrees are, in fact, college students."

Individual incomes in the Red study included 22 percent earning $30,000 to $49,000, and 33 percent earning $50,000 or more. Many of the climbers earning less than $20,000 were noted as full-time college students. A major difference between the Red and Chattanooga is that most climbers who visit the Red probably won't move there. In a 2014 study of the Red River Gorge area, coal mining and restaurants were listed as the top two employment sectors. The top two careers identified by climbers in the Chattanooga study were medical and technology, both central industries there. There are minimal job opportunities for this new breed of climber in the remote Red, plus not much of a centralized community. (The Red's closest city is Lexington, 1.5 hours away.)

"There's a lot of different things that happened in a relatively recent timeframe," says Charles Wood, the vice president of economic development for the Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce. "The economy is diverse, and it's really jumped over the last four or five years." In 2009, Volkswagen invested a billion dollars to open a new plant in Chattanooga, hiring 2,000 people. As of 2017, the plant employs 3,200. In 2011, the city's publicly owned Electric Power Board of Chattanooga (EPB) began to offer 1 gigabit-per-second Internet, which is 200 times the national average. Four years later, EPB implemented a 10-gigabit-per-second speed and made it available to all homes and businesses. Chattanooga was the first city in the Western Hemisphere to offer this, earning it the nickname "The Gig City."

"The Gig got launched, and fiber is a big deal," Wood says. "It makes our electric grid more reliable, which helps all manufacturing companies and individuals, and it attracts information, data, and tech companies." Those companies can recruit nationally and internationally because of the surrounding natural environment and outdoor sports. And it doesn't hurt that Tennessee has no income tax on salaries/wages. "You can get a great job and be on a mountain bike in 15 minutes," Wood says, "and you can do it for half the cost of places like Denver."

Dan Rose (left) and Max Poppel (right) in front of The Crash Pad hostel, 2017.

MAX POPPEL AND DAN ROSE spent their post-college years working various jobs and climbing. In 2005, Rose was living in Boone, North Carolina, while Poppel had just finished up an internship in Chattanooga. Poppel loved the people, the mild winters, the cost of living, and everything about the town, so he suggested it to Rose.

"We wanted to move here so we could climb every day," Rose says. Without any specific plans, the two friends settled in the Scenic City.

The duo had climbed throughout the South, camping at places like Miguel's in the Red River Gorge and Chattanooga's First Tennessee Pavilion. The pavilion is an open-air warehouse downtown that provides camping for the Triple Crown. With concrete floors and no other amenities, it was the only overnighting option other than pricier hotels near the city center. Primitive camping spots were far from town, and climbers were looking for a centralized basecamp.

"There [was] no other affordable accommodation," Rose says. "We wanted to make this adventure hub a social hub for visiting climbers." They took a business-planning course in 2009, and in summer 2010 took a 2.5-week road trip from San Diego to Seattle, staying in hostels, taking notes and pictures, and talking to managers. In 2011 in the Southside historic district, they opened The Crash Pad, which sleeps up to 40 people and has the tagline "an uncommon hostel." Prices are about $35 per night for a bunkbed and $95 for a private room. The Crash Pad has an outdoor space, a full kitchen and food storage, free breakfast, and WiFi and computer access. Their clientele includes outdoor enthusiasts, tourists, and business travelers.

"Chattanooga is an open-door-type city," Rose says. "It's easy to make an impact, and not everything has been done here already." That includes potential for new businesses like restaurants, breweries, etc., unlike comparable towns like Boulder, Colorado, and Austin, Texas, which are teeming with such businesses. And on the climbing-potential front, the sandstone seems limitless. For example, the SCC purchased Denny Cove, a 685-acre parcel 30 minutes northwest of Chattanooga, in July 2016. The three-mile cliffline has about 150 established routes and tons of new-routing potential.

"There's a reputation of being an old boy's club [in the South]," Poppel adds, "but you can cold email heads of giant foundations here, and they will reply to you, and then sit and listen. If you have an idea, there are people who will get behind you."

That's the story with High Point Climbing and Fitness, Chattanooga's newest gym. Gym owners John Wiygul and Johnny O'Brien met at a triathlon in 2005 and began training together. As a lifelong climber, Wiygul took O'Brien to a climbing gym for strength training, and O'Brien loved it. With 35 years of experience in the healthcare industry, including running a $1 billion company, O'Brien saw a huge opportunity after discussing a new gym with Wiygul. O'Brien invested $4 million of his own cash and used his personal banking relationships to get another $2.5 million for High Point. Since then,

High Point has opened a second facility in Chattanooga, and one in Birmingham, Alabama, and has announced plans for two more locations, one in Alabama and one in Tennessee.

The first High Point (downtown) was part of a redevelopment project called "The Block," which includes a coffee shop and the outdoor retailer Rock/Creek. Rose and Poppel also experienced this snowball effect, where new business begets new business, when they opened The Flying Squirrel next to their hostel in 2013. As a late-night bar that serves food, it was the only place of its kind in the neighborhood. A year later, Clyde's, a bar that appeals to the college crowd, opened down the street, which instantly created foot traffic between the two. Suddenly, the zone had become a burgeoning restaurant-bar district. Now there are more than a dozen hot spots within a few blocks.

WITH THE INFLUX of climbers and other tourists comes a unique set of drawbacks. There's a major health disparity between longtime locals and the active outdoor residents that Bailey would like to see resolved. Many longtime residents don't climb or recreate. Lack of nutrition education combined with inactivity means obesity is an issue. "It's a crazy contrast where you have this amazing outdoor town, but nobody is active," he says. "Hopefully we can connect longtime residents to the land they've been on for years." While there are no specific initiatives to do this, getting more people utilizing the surrounding outdoor playgrounds would help in conservation efforts and make the community healthier overall.

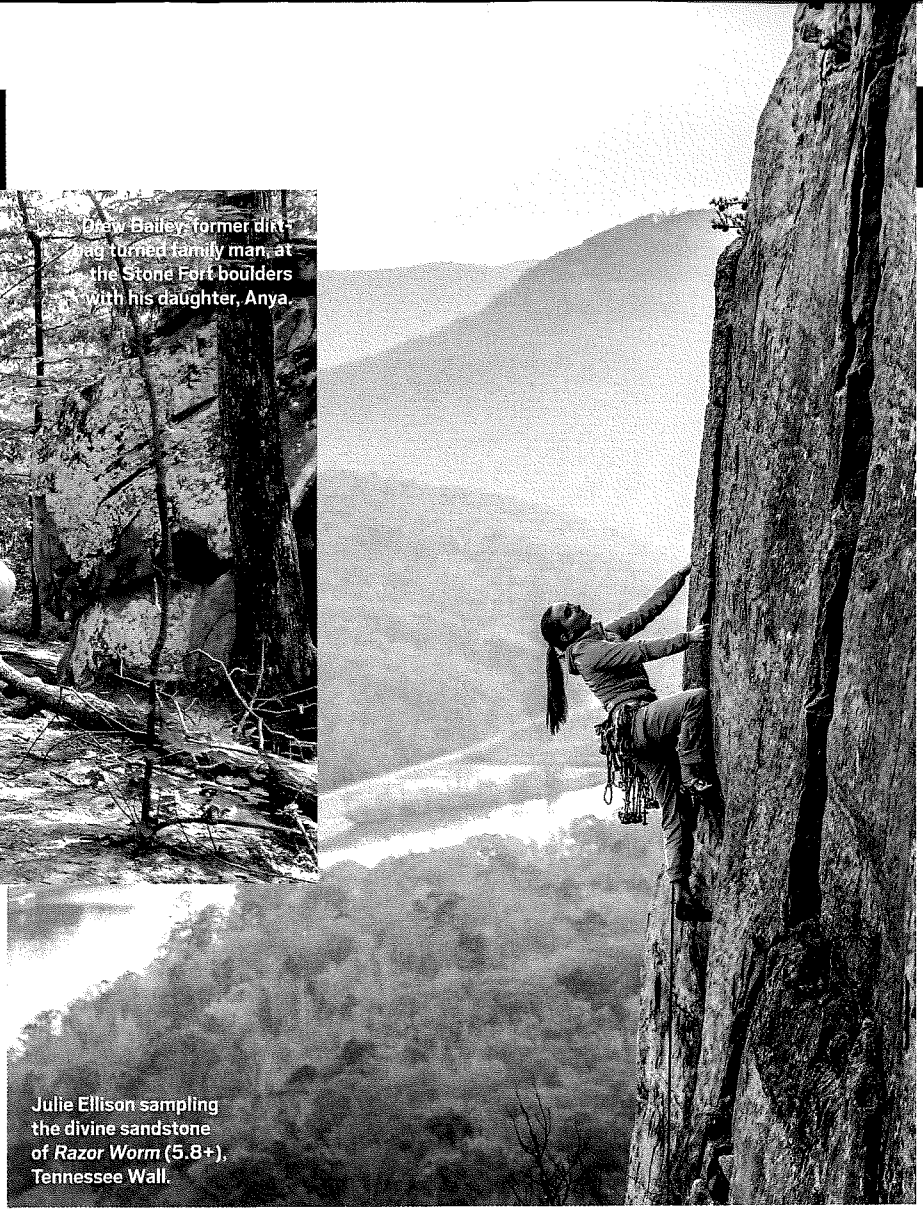
Rachel Prater, a climber and Crash Pad employee, warming up at Zahnd.

More climber traffic means more impact and access issues, and with some of the climbing near Chattanooga being privately owned, such as at popular places like Little Rock City and Castle Rock, it can create tension with landowners. Climbing land management on a large scale is relatively new in the South, and local climbing organizations are only loosely connected to each other and the government. An individualistic culture in the South also makes it difficult to get things done. People don't want government and other organizations telling them what to do, and organizing around a bigger cause is a challenge on both sides. Each landowner has specific requests for climbing management, and the climbers themselves adhere to their own rules, meaning they sometimes climb on private land that's not technically open.

"Many people moving here don't understand how it works in the South," Cody Roney, of the SCC, explains about climbers sharing photos of closed areas on social media and offering beta to friends. "They think, 'My buddy goes there, so why can't I?' We haven't lost any access potential yet, but landowners are taking notice."

Then there's the fact that the millions of dollars climbers spend each year don't go

Drew Bailey, former dirt-bag turned family man, at the Stone Fort boulders with his daughter, Anya.



Julie Ellison sampling the divine sandstone of *Razor Worm* (5.8+), Tennessee Wall.

directly back into climbing to help mitigate the impact associated with growth, like trail improvement, parking-lot maintenance, bolt upgrades, signage, and education. "It's $10 per day to climb at Little Rock City, and you've got 12,000 people climbing there in a year," Bailey says, speaking of the world-famous bouldering area on a golf course near town, "and none of that money goes back to climbing."

Most of the climber dollars are spent at restaurants and shops. "Return on investment is extremely robust given the lack of human resources and site infrastructure allocated to the generation of climbing-related tourism," reads the Chattanooga study. "Investment in climbing management, marketing, and infrastructure would greatly enhance tourism attraction." Further, it suggests creative revenue sources for sustainable climbing infrastructure and cross-marketing partnerships with shops and restaurants.

And yet, the economic power of climbers has translated in other ways. In 2017, Roney hired a part-time stewardship director for the SCC. When the SCC purchased Denny Cove, the state of Tennessee was one of the biggest funders. It was a circumstance that opened up because climbing has evolved into a legitimized sport. "They think it's cool now, and they want climbers [on the land]," Roney says. "So many new partnership opportunities have opened up because they're realizing the economic impacts of climbing."

Bailey and his wife still climb in Chattanooga, but their days of noodles in the truck are over. The family of three gets up, makes breakfast, and packs "an ungodly amount of gear and accessories, much of which is bought locally," says Bailey. They'll top off the gas tank ($20) and grab coffee and snacks from Whole Foods ($20) before heading to the rock, where they meet other climbers with kids. After climbing, they almost always head to a restaurant and have dinner in a group. "$50 is a low standard for us," Bailey says. "Climbing is still a central part of our lives, but our expectations are different. Now my proudest moments are when my six-year-old girl is driven to send something at her limit—like her first multi-pitch this past summer."

CHATTANOOGA ECONOMIC-IMPACT STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

→ Climbing in Chattanooga brought in over 16,565 nonresident visits in the 2015/16 climbing season, including 8,698 unique visitors (10,185, if including Hamilton County residents).
→ Seventy percent of climbers surveyed were visitors, and 30 percent were locals. Median visitor age was 26 (mean = 28), most having completed some college (42 percent) or having a college degree (29 percent).
→ The most popular attraction for visitors was downtown restaurants and stores (28.8 percent).
→ While camping was the most common form of lodging (48 percent), climbing visitors generated a total of 2,709 paid hotel/hostel room nights in the 2015/16 season.
→ Average per-trip expenditure was $178 per person (visitors only). The average visitor spent the most money on food ($55.35), with food expenditures reaching $2,286,936.17.

FROM LEFT: DREW BAILEY COLLECTION; ANDREW BURR