

Jana Horvath finishes area hiking challenge

Veronica Martinez

Las Cruces Sun-News USA TODAY NETWORK – NEW MEXICO

LAS CRUCES – Jana Horvath hiked on Soledad Bar Canyon an early morning in May. As she took a selfie in front of the waterfall that sits at the end of the trail, she knew this wasn't another regular hike for her.

This was the last of the 86 miles of hiking trails she needed to complete the Soroptimist Challenge she had started in December.

The challenge consists of 17 nearby trails varying in difficulty. Horvath is the first participant to have completed the challenge this year.

This isn't the first time Horvath has hiked some of the trails that are part of the challenge, which is now in its second season. In 2018 she joined a friend in some of the challenges and decided to sign up for the 2019-2020 edition.

“When I found out it was for a good cause, it just deepened the meaning of the challenge,” Horvath said. “At this point it got me out of my comfort zone.”

Soroptimist International of Las Cruces put together the hiking program to raise funds for disadvantaged women that want to continue their educational and career goals.

This year, the program had 40 participants and was able to raise \$1,500.

“We were trying to think outside the box and think of something that would be really different and that would appeal to a wide range of people,” Janet Brydon, public awareness chair for SI of Las Cruces, said. “We figured this would be a good family activity but it can also be an individual activity.”

The hiking challenge ended up being the only Soroptimist program the nonprofit was able to conduct after COVID-19 took hold in March. It's proven to be a good fit during the pandemic.

The challenge encouraged people to go outside, keep social distancing and to be done alone or along other household members. With every hike, participants raised points that would get them prizes and a patch.



Jana Horvath sits at the top of Picacho Peak posing for a picture as part of the Soroptimist Challenge of 2020. Horvath was the first participant to complete all trails of the 2019-2020 Soroptimist International of Las Cruces fundraiser to support women's educational programs. COURTESY OF SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF LAS CRUCES

The 2019-2020 Soroptimist Challenged registration closed in June, meaning residents can no longer sign up to win prizes. Registrants have until December to complete as many trails as they can. However, the trail maps for the challenges are still available for to view online for anyone who wishes to try them.

Participants are required to follow the set trails and take a selfie at specific locations to prove they have completed the trail.

“Every time they sent pictures in, they would talk about how much fun they had and that they were glad to do this for Soroptimist,” Brydon said. “I felt that Jana really got the message that this was about hiking and having fun, but it was also about helping others and improving the lives of women in our community.”

Bringing awareness to everyday struggles

Even as an experienced hiker who grew up in Colorado hiking and mountain biking, Horvath said the trails she took during the Soroptimist Challenge were out of her comfort zone and ones she was sure she wouldn't have hiked without encouragement.

“Challenges are good for us, but some challenges are ones that we need help with,” the 50-year-old avid hiker said.

One distinctive trail was Cox Peak, for its difficulty. The trail wasn't long but the road was steep with loose rocks and cacti she had to be careful not to step on.

But then, the trail started to show a different landscape she hadn't seen before. She passed a meadow of yellow and orange poppies that only encouraged her to keep going, Horvath said.

Horvath said she thought about the Soroptimist Challenge as a quest she had chosen for herself and recognized that in the case that she didn't finish all the trails there were no consequences.

“But the girls in Soroptimist, they have challenges that they really didn't get to pick or even know how to navigate,” Horvath said.

Horvath earned the Mountain Lion patch with the 125 points she got from completing the 17 trails and she plans to sew it on to her backpack. She sees the patch as a tool to bring awareness.

“I think sometimes people will ask about them,” Horvath, who is ready to take on her next hike, said. “So instead of being about me being out hiking I can explain the real meaning about those patches and how they're supporting Soroptimist.”

SI of Las Cruces provides guidance, training and resources for high school students. With its “Dream It, Be It” and “Live Your Dreams” awards, the organization has helped women in Las Cruces to offset the costs of entering college.

“Our programs essentially support women who have had lots of obstacles to overcome in their lives, whether it's domestic abuse or poverty,” Brydon said.

Veronica Martinez is a trending and immigration reporter for the Las Cruces Sun-News She can be reached at vmartinezjacobo@gannett.com or @vamartinez10 on Twitter.