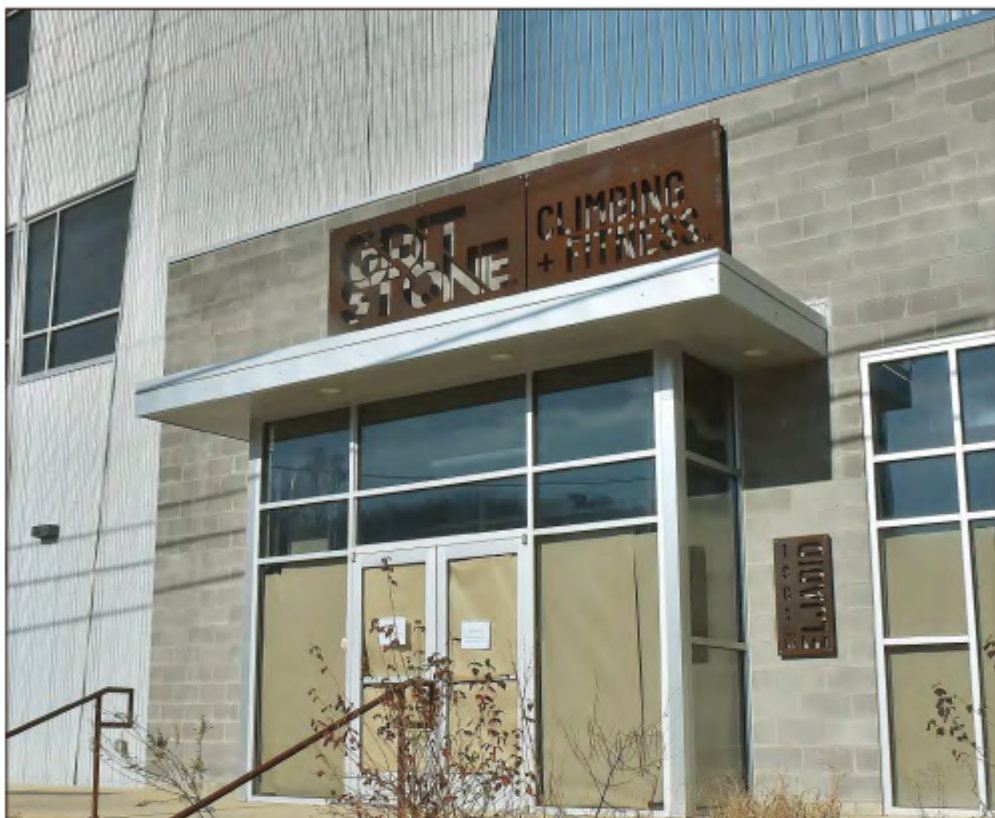


# Working to reopen Gritstone



Ron Ritterhouse/The Dominion Post

Gritstone in Sabraton is closed after the bank foreclosed on the loan. Members are trying to raise money to get it reopened.

## Bank forecloses though facility was starting to see profits

BY EVA MAYS

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West Virginia is renowned for its world-class rock climbing in places like Coopers Rock State Forest and Seneca Rocks.

But for the close-knit Morgantown climbing community, options for indoor training were limited.

Chris Bailey, a West Virginia native and long-time Morgantown resident, began the process to construct a premier sport rock climbing gym in Sabraton in 2017. Many awaited the opening of Gritstone Climbing + Fitness with a sense of eager anticipation. The 20,000-square-foot facility would be nirvana for climbers and other fitness enthusiasts, featuring over 100 roped routes across 9,000 square feet of climbing surface, a full-service gym and a yoga studio.

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, affecting the construction schedule. The facility opened in August 2020, just months too late to take advantage of any COVID government assistance for businesses.

Despite the roadblocks created by the ongoing pandemic, including low membership and visitation, the gym thrived in many ways. It balanced safety protocols and business, offering a wide range of services and providing a sense of community and belonging to its patrons.

Gritstone even held fundraisers for area nonprofits and hosted the USA Climbing regional competition.

Once COVID-19 safety restrictions began to ease, membership and revenue began to increase.

"I feel that September 2022 was when our business really started," said Bailey. "Most gyms experience their worst month in September, but we grew."

Despite these gains, Gritstone was facing struggles, including high inflation. In an emotional video posted on Facebook on Nov. 4, Bailey opened up about the financial difficulties the gym faced after opening during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We failed to meet the profit that we needed to be viable as a business," he said. "So, the bank is going to exercise its right to foreclose on us. They are going to sell the gym on the courthouse steps."

Bailey said he had reported the recent increase in revenue to the bank, and hoped to be granted more time to continue on the path of growth.

"We've struggled since we opened, and I can't blame the bank for its actions," Bailey said. "Though we were finally seeing the growth we needed recently it was too little, too late."

Bailey ended the video on a positive note, sharing that he believed the foreclosure would be a good next step.

"This allows the business to shed debt in order to become viable," he said. "We should all be excited to have this community resource continue."

He encouraged people to continue to use the gym to ensure the long-term survival of the business.

However, the gym would not remain open after the sale, contrary to what Bailey believed. Unified Bank, which is headquartered in eastern Ohio, purchased the gym on Nov. 29 for \$2.8 million. By the morning of Nov. 30,

# GRITSTONE

FROM PAGE B-1

the bank had changed the locks to the building, turned off the water and posted a "No Trespassing" sign.

"We are all devastated," read a post on Gritstone's Facebook page that announced the unexpected closure. "None more so than the employees of Gritstone. To be suddenly without a job. Less than a month before Christmas."

Unified Bank did not respond to multiple requests for comments.

Dan and Heidi Nawrocki have been

involved with Gritstone since its inception, with Dan being one of the founding members. Prior to the gym's closure, the couple's young daughter had been active in the competitive youth climbing team, where she developed the skills to rank second in her division regionally.

"She has aspirations of going to the Olympics," said Heidi Nawrocki. "She went from training 12 hours a week to having no gym."

The sudden closure galvanized the Nawrocki family into action. Heidi began an Instagram (@Save\_Gritstone) and

email account (SaveGritstone@gmail.com) dedicated to saving the gym.

"Morgantown really benefits from having Gritstone here," she said. "Our goal is to get it back open as quickly as possible."

The Nawrockis hope to locate potential investors and collaborators who can work to find a way to keep Gritstone in local hands. Community members interested in assisting in their efforts are encouraged to send an email to the above address to be added to the email list.

In addition to seeking solutions for the gym itself, the Nawrockis also

wanted to assist Gritstone's staff. The couple started a GoFundMe fundraiser to help replace the income lost when the gym closed without warning. In four days, 76 individuals contributed over \$9,000 to the fund. Donations will be accepted at <https://gofund.me/018f2259> through today.

As for the fate of the gym, Bailey has hope.

"Climbers are resilient," he said. "We are used to conforming ourselves to hulking granite faces. We ponder and strive and seek a way. I believe the gym and its community will continue in some form."