



On the Ropes

Suspended 40 feet up, his foot stuck between two tightrope wires, graduate student Jay Chodaparambil is not quite sure how to proceed. “Get over it! C’mon, get a move on!” comes the joking encouragement of his research adviser, Karolin Luger. Chodaparambil eases forward as Luger cheers from below.

As a unique twist on the typical summer lab outing, Luger, an HHMI investigator at Colorado State University, has brought her 21 lab members to the school’s ropes course for a scorching July day of challenging physical activities, team-building exercises, and outdoor fun—culminating with 40-foot-high tightropes, swaying rope ladders, and something called the Swinging Log of Terror.

After an ice-breaking foam noodle fight, the group gets down to business—two teams prepare to cross a low-ropes course of unsteady wire, rope, and wooden elements without touching the ground. At one end, a team mulls its first challenge: use two wooden “skis” with rope handles to get all members safely to a platform at the opposite end.

The first bunch starts out but soon freezes, unable to coordinate their feet

with their commands of “right” and “left.” At one chaotic moment, two people yell “right” and “left” simultaneously. Finally, a loud baritone—undergraduate student researcher John Mecoli—takes control from the rear, and the group begins cross-country “skiing.” “We have a natural leader!” says Luger triumphantly.

The Luger lab studies the structural biology and biochemistry of the nucleosome, a unit of DNA wrapped around eight histone proteins, which helps form chromatin. And while lab members certainly resemble tangled DNA wound around ropes, wires, and each other, there is little talk of science. Everyone enjoys cutting loose a bit outside of the lab. Postdoc Young-Jun Park, typically reserved, reveals his inner prankster on the course, rattling his team’s wire balancing act.

During lunch, the group finds a shady spot to dig into giant deli sandwiches and gulp Gatorade. Between bites, Luger explains that the ropes course tradition started three years ago, initiated by lab manager Pam Dyer when the lab was smaller. “Everyone got addicted to it and it’s really just plain fun,” says Luger. “But I also learn who the leaders are and who likes to step back and see where the wind blows.”

It helps her manage the lab’s growing numbers as well. “In lots of large labs, things can get competitive, which I try to avoid,” she says. “If two people are having a problem, I like to say, ‘Go hash it out and I will try to facilitate’—

which is exactly what we do here at the ropes course.”

She takes off suddenly, running gleefully with two students through the lawn sprinklers. Nearby, postdoc Andy Andrews observes, “I just can’t imagine my old research adviser doing that.”

—Kendall Powell



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KAROLIN LUGER