

## **Great Western Power gym helps downtown Oakland climb to new heights**

*New gym is part of a district "destined to become a lively, maybe even defiantly, hip place to live"*

Oakland, CA – FEBRUARY 14, 2008 -- A 13,000-square-foot climbing gym, Great Western Power Company, has opened at 520 20th St. in downtown Oakland. Housed in a historic power plant, the new gym is the latest in a series of businesses that are putting new life in classic Oakland buildings. It's part of a district that San Francisco magazine said "is destined to become a lively, maybe even defiantly, hip place to live."

In picking this location for the gym, Touchstone Climbing Inc. contributed to that goal. The gym is a place for nearby residents to play, climb, work out and socialize without having to get in a car and drive somewhere. The neighborhood includes a large condo building now under construction right across the street. The company also is committed to reaching out by providing access to hundreds of youth-at-risk and adults-in-need at low or no cost, creating the opportunity for these people to challenge themselves and build confidence and self-esteem. Food drives and donations to philanthropic ventures are also part of the company culture.

"We feel that Oakland is an eclectic, energetic and diverse community with a lot of potential for growth and improvement," says general manager Lyn Verinsky. New condos, stores and restaurants have been sprouting within a mile of the gym, and already several nearby schools have brought kids to climb at Great Western on a weekly basis. Many of them had never had the opportunity to see rock climbing before. Great Western also quickly became a magnet for parties and corporate events.

The commitment to the community shows in the revitalization of the building, chosen for its striking architecture and history. The gym's name comes from the electric utility that built the building in 1924 as a steam-powered generation plant. Great Western Power Co. was one of many independent power companies in the early years of the 20th century. It grew to become a rival for Pacific Gas & Electric Co. Press reports of the time tell of a race by the two utilities to electrify California's coastal cities. Eventually, PG&E dominated and bought out Great Western Power in 1930. The old power plant on 20th street was decommissioned and put to other uses.

In renovating the building, the gym respected the facade and architecture, leaving intact the cornices and two-story stone arch over the front door. No funky glass or steel additions here, no garish paint job, just a great place for people to work out and climb – in a building that connects the past with the present. A landmark feature is the 150-foot smokestack that begins on the climbing floor inside and extends 100-feet above the roofline.

The old building joins a long list of downtown Oakland landmarks that are being renovated, including the Cathedral Building on Broadway, the Fox Oakland Theater on Telegraph Avenue and the old Southern Pacific railroad station on 16th Street.

"The structure is perfect for our use," says Verinsky. "Half the building has a very high ceiling, which allowed us to build our rope climbing area up to a consistent 48 feet. The space is airy, light-filled and very attractive, with skylights that run the length of the roof and great wide windows on either end of the building. It has a great, industrial feel."

The gym features 11,000 square feet of climbing terrain, 1,500 square feet of bouldering, and more than 50 top and lead ropes. Hand-applied stucco on the climbing walls brings out cool geometric features of the walls by using a variety of colors.

There's also an upstairs fitness room with big screen TVs. Other rooms on the second floor are available for yoga, cardio classes and more.

"The training room will be the perfect place for our serious climbers and other athletes to get stronger," Verinsky says.

Less than a half-dozen blocks from City Hall, Lake Merritt, BART and bus lines, the gym is in a convenient spot for lunchtime workouts or quick stop on the daily commute. The gym stays open until 10 p.m. on weekdays, adding to the nightlife and fitting in with nearby clubs and restaurant that local residents frequent.

One Oakland resident who comes to Great Western Power Company is novelist Leonard Chang.

"I live less than a mile away, within walking distance. It's really nice to have this new gym open up right near me," he said. "What's nice about the gym is I meet a whole bunch of people from all walks of life outside my usual profession, the writers and critics, and I've met a nice community of climbing friends."

He appreciates the fact that the gym is open late.

"One of the problems downtown is that there is a lot going on during the day, but at night and on the weekends to some extent it's harder to attract people down there," he said. "So this sort of thing, revitalizing older buildings, it's more than just commercialization of downtown Oakland."

Great Western Power Company is providing jobs for Oakland as well. Verinsky likes to bike from her south Berkeley home when the weather permits, and at least two of her coworkers can walk to work.

Touchstone is known for creating friendly, supportive, fun and safe environments where participants of all ages and ability levels can participate in athletic and social activities, and hopes to find other great spaces in the Bay Area to further that goal.

Want a look at the Great Western Power Company building? Go to Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com>), type in "520 20th St., Oakland, CA" and click on the little box labeled "Street View." The white buttons in the photo allow you to pan 360 degrees, zoom in, or move up and down the street.

To see the inside during the wall construction phase, go to the photo album posted at <http://touchstoneclimbing.com/gallery/v/gyms/gwpc/>

**Gym contact:** Lyn Verinsky, General Manager, Great Western Power Company, 520 20th St. Oakland CA 94612, tel 510-452-2022, fax 510-452-2032, [lyn@touchstoneclimbing.com](mailto:lyn@touchstoneclimbing.com). Or visit [www.touchstoneclimbing.com/gw.html](http://www.touchstoneclimbing.com/gw.html) for classes, hours, directions, and other gym information.

**Media contact:** Rebekah Donaldson, Projects Director, Business Communications Group, 530-231-5397  
or [rd@bizcomgrp.com](mailto:rd@bizcomgrp.com).

###