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HIGH-WIRE SKILLS: TEAM-BUILDING AT LCRA'S NATURE PARKS

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BASTROP, TX – Three stories above the rocky ground, John Mosher is trying to stabilize his 200-pound frame on top of a razor-thin wire with only a rope for support. Suited in a harness and helmet, he looks down at the cheering teenagers he's leading in this trust-building retreat.

"What did I get myself into?" he recalls asking himself. By the time Mosher makes it across the wire, his knees are shaking. "While I was on the course, I was feeling a mix of fear and confidence. I felt the support of the people below, but at the same time that adrenaline kicks in."

Mosher, the pastoral associate for youth at St. John Neumann Church in Austin, led a group of 70 teenagers and adults through the ropes course at McKinney Roughs Nature Park southeast of Austin. The nature park, owned by the Lower Colorado River Authority, provides a range of natural science and recreational programs, including outdoor team-building programs for all skill levels.

"The kids all loved it," says Mosher. "The exercises helped the kids break down walls and grow closer. They had to rise to the challenge to accomplish our goals."

All team-building experiences at LCRA parks focus on skills such as goal-setting, collective achievement, effective communications and leadership. They can be tailored to any group such as businesses, schools, youth groups and state agencies.

"A lot of places do team-building programs," said Brian Trusty, supervisor of LCRA's natural science centers. "But our program is unique. We put people outside in a fun activity, with a trained professional who can safely challenge their limits."

In addition to challenge courses, McKinney Roughs Nature Park offers team-building programs like the Global Positioning System (GPS) challenge, where teams are divided into groups and use a GPS to find specific points in the wilderness. Each group is scored on how fast it can complete the mission. The park also has guided river programs that allow groups to enjoy the Colorado River. Team-building programs can range anywhere from four hours to four days depending on what a group wants to achieve.

Canyon of the Eagles Nature Park on Lake Buchanan also offers the GPS challenge, along with guided kayaking programs and a relaxing river cruise. Matagorda Bay Nature Park on the Gulf of Mexico also features diverse programs such as kayaking and birding. On-site lodging and meeting facilities are available at McKinney Roughs and Canyon of the Eagles.

"People love to have the opportunity to develop competent outdoor skills," Trusty said.

"We help them learn those skills, and nearly everyone walks away with a real sense of achievement. I've never seen anyone disappointed."