



Employee Spotlight

October 14, 2020

Suzanne Nowicki and Elinor Mullin: Two-wheeled trailblazers

Suzanne Nowicki of the Space Sciences & Applications (ISR-1) group and her graduate student Elinor Mullin, also with ISR-1, work their way through a trail in the mountains of Los Alamos. The two are not hiking but rather are aboard specially designed mountain bikes.

Taking the lead, Suzanne shifts her mountain bike into a lower gear as she pushes the bike up a steep incline. Several yards behind Suzanne, Ellie eases the brakes on her bike as she makes a descent, using the bike's straight handlebars to circumvent obstacles on the trail that she cannot crawl or jump over.

"I learned how to mountain bike while in college," explains Ellie. "I have friends who go out on trails, and I really wanted to join them. I asked one of my friends to teach me the basics, and it just went from there."

"My inspiration is not as exciting as Ellie's," laughs Suzanne. "I started off with traditional biking, using my street bike on occasion to travel to work. Last year, I joined Ellie on a mountain-bike excursion, and I really liked it. I then went a few times with my husband, who has been mountain biking for several years. After these excursions, I realized my first bike was not good for overcoming some obstacles on the trail—I needed a bike that could handle the often-unpredictable terrain."

Although similar to other bicycles, mountain bikes are designed to be durable and flexible in often-rough terrain. Thus, these bikes have large knobby tires to grip dirt, suspension forks to absorb the shock of uneven terrain, and straight handlebars to enhance steering around close-quarter obstacles.

"It's difficult at first," says Suzanne, "but I stuck with it, eventually becoming better and better at it, learning skills that involve jumping, balance and how best to handle the bike when overcoming obstacles. It's really fun for me now."

Suzanne Nowicki "gets some air" while mountain biking through a trail in Los Alamos.

Ellie Mullin takes a moment to enjoy a sunset.

Hitting the trails

As a sport, mountain biking has evolved into various categories, such as cross country, all-mountain biking (also known as “Enduro”), dirt jumping and trail riding. Relatively new to the sport, Suzanne and Ellie primarily practice the sport of trail riding, as there are several good trails available in Los Alamos, White Rock and Santa Fe.

“What I really like about trail riding is that I can cover much more distance than I could while hiking,” says Suzanne. “The forests and mountains of New Mexico are so beautiful, and I found that I could see so much more while aboard my mountain bike.”

“Street biking is somewhat about speed—if you take it easy on the road, though, it’s really a care-free activity,” adds Ellie. “Mountain biking is really about focus. You really need to stay alert, as the trail ahead of you differs from moment to moment. You need to plan on how to overcome any given obstacles you are going to face—often, you have to make decisions in a matter of seconds, as obstacles on the trail appear in front of you from only feet away. Overcoming challenges—that’s what I really like about mountain biking.”

Some of the trails in Los Alamos conducive to mountain biking include American Springs Loop Mountain Bike Trail, Kwage Mesa Trail (a good beginner’s trail) and Pipeline Road Mountain Bike Trail.

Ellie Mullin pushes her mountain bike up an uneven incline.

Suzanne walks her bike through a puddle of water.

Skills come with time

Beginners may find that mountain biking is a challenging sport, as the likelihood of falling off the bike while on a trail is high. Both Suzanne and Ellie have experienced injuries while mountain biking, but both have remained tenacious in practicing the sport.

“You have to be patient when it comes to mountain biking,” says Ellie. “Some trails will prove very challenging. You may fall down a lot at the beginning. But as you progress, your skills will grow and you will wind up having a lot of fun.”

“It does take time,” adds Suzanne. “You will not be able to master the skills after just one outing. Accessing such remote places while mountain biking, it is very satisfying to me. It lets me clear my mind.”

Suzanne Nowicki takes a Zen moment from mountain biking to bask in the serene landscapes found in the remote areas of Los Alamos.

Ellie Mullin drinks some much-needed water before she hits the mountain trail again.