

# Club celebrates 65 years of ‘paradise for hiking’

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With southern Arizona’s natural beauty, miles of trails and numerous mountain ranges, it may come as no surprise that it’s also home to one of the oldest hiking clubs in the region.

The Southern Arizona Hiking Club, originally founded by University of Arizona students, turned 65 in December. The club has spent decades leading southern Arizonans on hikes around the state.

Nancy Debolt, 82, is one of the club’s hiking guides, leading members on hikes that range from 3-10 miles. She no longer hikes to the top of mountains but has summited 103 mountain peaks since joining in 2010.

“We live in a paradise for hiking,” she said, listing off mountain ranges as north as the Superstition Mountains east of Phoenix and as far south as the Chiricahua Mountains south of Tucson.

Debolt recalled one of her most memorable hikes, which turned into a harrowing journey and pushed her limits.

Debolt, who was 75 at the time, did a multiday backpacking trip through the Mazatzal Wilderness near Payson. Lightning, rain and hail made the journey more treacherous and unforgettable. She also had to trudge through mud and ended the hike with a 3,500-foot descent.

“Arizona has so much to offer, and I



**John Ohm, 75, holds up a sign Nov. 20 with the number 400 to commemorate reaching his 400th peak with the Southern Arizona Hiking Club on Bluebird Peak, east of Benson.**

**provided by** JOHN OHM

never dreamed that I would see as much of Arizona as I have hiking,” she said.

The club was founded in 1958 by members of the University of Arizona Ramblers, a hiking club for university students founded in 1946, according to club member Barbara Coon.

The Southern Arizona Hiking Club started with just 11 members in its first year, growing to almost 2,000 members at its peak in the early 2000s. Since

then, membership has declined. But since the COVID-19 pandemic members are increasing again at 811 members, said club President Tamara Derickson.

Derickson noted this anniversary will be the first that will be celebrated without a living founding member.

## Club honors latest 400-peak award winner

The club not only offers multiple hikes per day, but members can win awards based on how many approved peaks they climb within 150 miles of Tucson. Since 2002, 38 people have won the 400-peak award, the club’s highest award.

The most recent winner of the award is longtime member John Ohm, who earned his 400-peak award on Nov. 20 after hiking the Bluebird Peak in the Little Dragoon Mountains, east of Benson.

At 75 years old, he is the first person in eight years to earn that award.

Ohm joined the club in 2006 after wanting more challenging and varied hikes than those offered at other hiking clubs.

After his first full hike with the club, he came home dirty, scratched and bloody — to his wife’s horror.

“Oh, my goodness, what have you been doing?” he recalled her asking him upon his return.

“Hiking!” he replied, with a big smile. Although he was unsure if he could

continue his hiking streak after that intense climb, he persevered and hikes to this day.

“John has been ‘bagging peaks’ with SAHC ever since,” Derickson said.

## ‘These are my friends, this is our community’

Derickson, who became club president in September, joined the hiking club during the COVID-19 pandemic, shortly after she moved to Tucson.

With social distancing restrictions during the pandemic, hiking was one of the activities that people still do in groups. She quickly made friends with other hikers.

“I hear people all the time make the same comment ... This is like my family, these are my friends, this is our community. Everyone feels so connected,” she said.

The club has multiple hikes every day of the week for all experience levels. While some hikes are hours long and climb up steep mountains, others are easier and on flat terrain, or even pavement.

For Derickson, this club became her community, and she could always find people to hike with.

“It amazes me that with such a big group that we have, how close everyone is,” she said. “It’s just a very welcoming community. We are out hiking, talking, and socializing, getting exercise seeing beautiful things.”