

Retired Bel Air High school teacher builds trails on slopes of Franklin Mountains

By Ramón Rentería / El Paso Times

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Small and large cactuses dot the landscape near the biking trails.

[» Photos: Building Trails](#)

For Robert Newman, building trails along the rugged slopes of the Franklin Mountains is neither quick or easy.

"Nobody's ever accused me of putting in a trail too fast," he said.

Now 78, Newman has been out there among the rattlesnakes, cactus and sotol plants since 1999, building trails for mountain bikes in the more than 24,000 acres of desert and rocky terrain that is Franklin Mountains State Park, the largest urban park in the nation.

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Newman, a retired Bel Air High School math and science teacher, is an easygoing "bearded old guy," a volunteer adored by park officials, the mountain bike community and hikers for the patience and persistence that he devotes to the backbreaking work required to make countless trails across the Franklins rideable and just as accessible to hikers and runners.

On a recent job on the west side of the Franklins, Newman made it clear that he loves to work alone — just him, the wilderness and the solitude of nature.

"I'm not used to all this attention," he said. "I'd rather be out here in the boonies all by myself."

Newman has often spent days trying to move a single boulder off a trail that he's trying to clear.

"He's like the wise and caring grandfather that still likes to do cool things, is tough as nails, will tell you like it is when you need to hear the truth, and will be as humble as a servant when you start talking about all the great work he's done," said David Wilson, a past president of the Borderland Mountain Bike Association. "He reminds me of a garden gnome."

Wilson once put a garden gnome statue in one of the most beautiful and tranquil sections of the park along a northern trail that Newman had spent days grooming. Someone removed the token tribute.



Newman walks to a work site in the park. "I'm not used to all this attention," he said. "I'd rather be out here in the boonies all by myself."

Newman, a passionate hiker, took up mountain biking after he retired from teaching in 1993.

"I decided I didn't want to sit in front of the television and rot my life away," he said. "I took up mountain biking but found out you're covering more ground but not watching the scenery because you'd better keep your eye on the trail."

Newman gave up mountain biking when his wife suggested that a bad wreck would sideline him from biking and hiking.

For a while, he patrolled the park on Sundays looking for stranded bikers who might need water, a spare tube or just a helping hand. He is still a guardian angel of sorts for bikers who often stumble onto half-buried coolers that he stocks with water at his own expense.

Newman got hooked on constructing trails after taking a trail-building class offered by the International Mountain Bike Association in Las Cruces.

These days, hikers and bikers might run across him on a rocky slope with the tools of his trade: a heavy-duty hoe-rake combination called a McLeod, a 16-pound rock bar, a 16-pound sledgehammer, pick and axe, hand loppers, and hedge trimmer or shears. He also uses an inclinometer, a gadget that helps determine a trail's proper slope to minimize erosion.

He works at his own pace, sometimes taking a break under a bush, pulling his cap over his eyes and taking a nap.

"That's the beauty of being a volunteer," Newman said. "You don't have to worry about no deadlines."



Trans Mountain Road is visible in the distance from a mountain biking trail created by Robert Newman at Franklin Mountains State Park. (Photos by Rudy Gutierrez — El Paso Times)

The trail-building bug might have stung Newman a long time ago. As a boy in 1947 or 1948, he built a trail through the woods behind his house in East Texas.

"It probably wasn't but a quarter-mile long, but I could ride my bike on it," he said.

Newman tells people that you shouldn't build a mountain biking trail unless you're a mountain bike rider.

"Three of the most important things you need to consider when building any trail are erosion, erosion and erosion," he said. "If you can get that done, then the trail hopefully will stay there."

Paul Hanson coordinates beginner and intermediate mountain bike rides in El Paso for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. He applauds Newman for always willing to lend a hand to anybody.

"I can't say enough about what Robert has done to really make trails that stand the test of weather and time and that are truly scenic trails that hundreds, if not thousands, of people enjoy all year long," Hanson said. "The best and crazy part about it is that he does it all for free as a volunteer."

Robert McCorkle, a spokesman for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, credits volunteers like Newman "with augmenting park staffs and keeping parks well maintained and running smoothly."

"Last fiscal year, our volunteers performed a variety of invaluable services, putting in more than 500,000 hours of work that represented a savings to the state of almost \$10 million in wages alone. Our state parks couldn't do without them," McCorkle said.

Professional mountain bikers across the United States have often labeled Newman's sotol forest trail as one of the best trails they have ever ridden.

Don Baumgardt, the owner of Piñata Publishing, describes Newman as "a real unsung hero."

"Over the years, I've run into him in the most remote places in the park, moving rocks and scratching out a clear path," he said. "Not only does he put in a lot of time building trails, he does it correctly."

El Paso mountain biker Brent Sanders sometimes gets the impression that Newman gets a kick watching bikers ride the trails that he took so long to plot, build and then maintain.

"All who hike, run or ride their bikes in our mountains are indebted to him and his trail building prowess and dedication," Sanders said. "It is impossible to understand the amount of work it takes to build a simple trail until you are lucky enough to get the opportunity to work with Robert. Rocks that seem unmovable are all of a sudden moved, hundreds of them. Each one of them moved by human hands, mostly Robert's, out of the way to make what seemed impassable all of a sudden a beautiful trail."

Over the years, Newman has had some close calls with rattlesnakes while working on trails, but he has never been bitten. He says he does what he does mostly for the challenge of transforming sometimes steep, rocky and wretched mountain terrain into a trail that someone can ride or hike.

"I love these mountains," he said. "I love it out here."

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