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FOCUS ON SKI & MOUNTAIN TRAVEL

Driving diversity on the slopes

The U.S. ski industry, partnering with nonprofits, is introducing more women and people of color to skiing and snowboarding.

ROBERT SILK AND REBECCA TOBIN

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Grace Sekiziyivu was introduced to skiing for free this season through Ski Utah's Discover Winter program. She says she'll continue with the sport. (Courtesy of Grace Sekiziyivu)

Tammy VuPham, a Vietnamese American who grew up in Georgia, says she felt a bit out of place on the mountain after she moved to the Seattle area and took up downhill skiing in 2019.

Nevertheless, the avid outdoor enthusiast and accomplished climber loved the feeling of freedom she felt on the snow. So, last year, when VuPham learned about a scholarship opportunity offered by the Big Sky, Mont.-based nonprofit Women of Winter for women of color who want to teach skiing and snowboarding, she jumped at the opportunity.

The four-day program held last March was the first of its sort offered by Women of Winter. For VuPham it paid off. She left Montana with Level 1 certification from the Professional Ski Instructors of America and American Association of Snowboard Instructors (PSIA-AASI), a credential that helped her attain an instructor position this season at Washington state's Crystal Mountain.

TRAVEL WEEKLY



Tammy VuPham, who instructed at Crystal Mountain in Washington state this season, is a product of the first Women of Winter ski instructor scholarship program held in March 2021. (Courtesy of Tammy VuPham)

VuPham spent weekends this winter instructing new skiers of all ages from a wide variety of racial and economic backgrounds. But with white skiers and snowboarders still comprising 87.5% of the U.S. market and males making up 60% of ski area patrons, according to the National Ski Areas Association, VuPham recognizes that her very presence can serve as an inspiration to other women and other people of color.

“Being a woman of color, I have taught a lot of other BIPOC skiers who see me and say, ‘You can ski like that, then I can do it too,’” she said, using the acronym for Black, indigenous and people of color.

Across the U.S. ski industry, initiatives geared toward diversity have ramped up since the summer of 2020, when the killing of George Floyd inspired a far-reaching examination of persistent racial inequality in the U.S.

Women of Winter is one example. Founder Chris Walch, a ski instructor at the Big Sky area’s Yellowstone Club, launched the organization in 2018 with a focus on providing scholarships for women to get certified in avalanche

safety. But in summer 2020, she decided to pivot Women of Winter toward opening doors for women skiers and riders of color.



Women of Winter provides scholarships for women of color to earn certification as ski instructors. Here, a program participant works on her snowboarding terrain park skills at Colorado's Eldora ski area. (Courtesy of Women of Winter)

“We decided we could create pathways on the mountain and include people who had historically been excluded,” Walch said.

This year, with support from the PSIA-AASI, Women of Winter expanded its instructor training program, offering one four-day session each at Big Sky, Colorado's Eldora, Minnesota's Hyland Hills and Windham

Mountain in New York and awarding scholarships to 30 women.

Larger efforts by big industry players, including Vail Resorts, Alterra Mountain Co. and Ski Utah, to name a few, are also afoot.

Vail Resorts launched its Epic for Everyone program in 2019, before Floyd's death, to expand access to youth of color at its 37 North American ski resorts. But this year, in conjunction with former CEO Rob Katz's family foundation Katz Amsterdam Charitable Trust, the company expanded the initiative, providing grants totaling \$560,000 to 11 organizations that support youth of color in cities near Vail ski areas. Vail also donated \$1.1 million in products and services, such as lift tickets, equipment rental and lessons. The partnerships helped the company host approximately 5,500 youth at its mountains this year, up from 4,500 last year, spokeswoman Marjory Elwell said.

One place where those Vail Resorts dollars are being put to use is on New York's Hunter Mountain.

At 1 p.m. on a beautiful bluebird Sunday this February, the learning slopes at Hunter were filling up with kids, and waiting to receive them were instructors with "Hunter Mountain" printed on the back of their blue jackets. One group started heading to the lifts, while others gathered around their instructors with their rental skis and boards.

Hunter is an important piece in the Epic for Everyone program because it is one of the closest Vail-owned mountains to New York. A New York City-based organization, Good Shepherd Services, was the largest recipient of the program's grants this year.



A group with Good Shepherd Services hits the slopes on New York's Hunter Mountain. (Photo by Caitlin Clonan)

Sarah Slutzky, Hunter's director of skier services, recalled that her grandfather and uncle, who developed Hunter in the early 1960s, used the ski area's proximity to New York to bring kids' groups up for introductory ski days; transportation, lunch, rentals and lessons would be part of the offer.

"He knew that this was something that needed to happen to introduce people to the sport," Slutzky said of her grandfather. "Skiing is a sport you have to be introduced to; most people aren't just going to wake up in the morning and put on sticks and slide down snow. He wanted to introduce the concept to communities in New York."

Slutzky said the previous outreach had "no formality" to it, and in many cases Hunter only hosted a kid once. But Epic for Everyone structures and expands on the concept. Kids get five weeks of skiing or snowboarding lessons plus a lift ticket and rental for two additional days.

Slutzky said the program also pays for "soft goods" for participants who need ski jackets and pants, gloves and goggles.

Between the Good Shepherd program and another called Thrillseekers, a member of the National Brotherhood of Skiers, up to 120 kids from those programs were skiing or riding on Hunter's slopes on Sunday afternoons this season, with nearly all the resort's instruction staff engaged in the activity.

Slutzky said the program aimed to introduce children to the sport as well as provide a window into a possible career option.

"It's pretty hard not to be successful at introducing something fun to kids," she said. "Maybe some of them will like it and continue to come to a ski resort."

Alterra is also making a substantial inclusivity push, following through with pledges it made during the summer of 2020. Last September, the company entered into a partnership with the Rhode Island-based Share Winter Foundation, which this year provided grants to 49 organizations around the country to further its goal of making winter sports more diverse and accessible.

Alterra has pledged nearly \$4 million to Share Winter over a "multiyear" collaboration. The company declined to give a more specific time frame.



Children enjoy time at Sugarbush Resort in Vermont thanks to funding from the Share Winter Foundation, which helps youth of color become involved in snow sports. (Courtesy of Sugarbush Resort)

The partnership had an immediate impact, said Share Winter CEO Constance Beverley.

“That Alterra donation is an absolute game-changer for what we do,” she said. “We were able to recruit 1,200 youth from across the country who have never been on snow.”

Among Share Winter grant recipients are YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs locations and numerous other nonprofits. In total, said Beverley, Share Winter grants helped get approximately 45,000 youth onto downhill ski areas or into Nordic skis this year. The organization awarded approximately \$1.5 million in grants, up from \$1 million during the 2020-21 winter season.

Beverley praised Alterra’s commitment as “incredibly genuine and thorough.”

Another important development for Share Winter this year, Beverley said, is that it began receiving support from corporations outside the ski industry, notably United Airlines and Motel 6.

United, which has a hub in Denver and flies to numerous ski destinations, including Aspen, Vail, Steamboat Springs, Mammoth Lakes, Big Sky, Jackson Hole, Sun Valley and Reno-Tahoe, became the first company outside the ski industry to partner with Share Winter when it donated \$25,000 in December.

Motel 6, which says it has more than 280 locations near ski resorts, followed in January, agreeing to provide mountain transport to 150 children in California who were participating in programs funded by Share Winter grants.

Still, Beverley said the picture isn’t entirely rosy. Donations from individual donors are tracking strongly for winter 2022-23, but business donations are down.

A pipeline for snow sports enthusiasts

While Vail and Alterra are focusing their philanthropy on diversifying the mix of young skiers and riders, the destination marketing organization Ski Utah has taken a different approach with the launch this winter of a pilot program called Discover Winter. Boosted by a \$70,000 grant from the Utah Governor’s Office of Economic Assistance and further aided by various industry partners, including ski areas and equipment makers, Discover Winter provided free introductions to skiing and snowboarding to nearly 200 adults of color.

Under the program, participants received four complimentary passes at ski areas in the state, including Alta, Brighton, Snowbird, Snowbasin, Solitude and Woodward Park City, as well as lessons, rental equipment and donated clothing such as goggles, ski jackets and snow pants.

Upon completing the course, participants received a Ski Utah Yeti Pass, providing free skiing for the remainder of the season.

Discover Winter was open to adults of color who had never skied, regardless of their income. The program is intended to augment Ski Utah's discount pass program for fifth and sixth graders, spokeswoman Alison Palmintere said, and to ease entry barriers for adults of color who'd like to ski or snowboard but don't quite know how to get started.

"Even if you have financial means, it is a little bit daunting," she said. "We are hoping that we removed some of the guesswork of entering skiing and that they will be able to purchase passes on their own next year and ski, if this is something they enjoy."

One of the participants was Grace Sekiziyivu, who learned about Discover Winter from the nonprofit Ngoma YAfrica Cultural Center in Provo, where she volunteers. Sekiziyivu, 22, said she used to wonder what snow would feel like beneath skis. But after spending four days learning the sport at Solitude in January and February, she doesn't have to wonder anymore.

She plans to continue skiing on her own.

"I definitely will. I have some basics down now; I won't have to do the pizzas and fries," Sekiziyivu said, referencing techniques that are commonly taught in beginner ski lessons.

Ski Utah hopes to continue Discover Winter next year, Palmintere said, though the funding has not yet been secured.

"At a very minimum, we'll continue to support similar programs like this that target diverse individuals," she said.

Programs that target adults offer an added potential benefit of spawning all-new initiatives from graduates.

That's what Bree Jameson, a 2021 Women of Winter ski instructor training scholarship recipient, is attempting. An avid climber, caver and all-around outdoor enthusiast, Jameson said she founded the program Minorities in Outdoor Recreation and Education Outside, which goes by the acronym MORE, in her hometown of San

Antonio in 2019. The program's mission is to expose economically disadvantaged individuals, as well as women and people of color, to the benefits of outdoor recreation.



Bree Jameson earned a ski instructor credential last year through Women of Winter. Now she's starting a program to introduce economically disadvantaged individuals, women and people of color from Texas to skiing in Colorado. (Courtesy of Bree Jameson)

So far, Jameson has focused MORE on activities like hiking and climbing that are available in Texas, but this year she began working toward a goal of taking two groups of 15 people each for free introductory ski trips in Colorado next winter.

Jameson said she's confident she'll obtain the financial support in time.

"It's for the folks that we're serving but also for the folks we're not serving, so that they can see that people who are not like them, that are from different walks of life, also deserve to be in these spaces," Jameson said.

Correction: An earlier version of this report incorrectly stated that Vail Resorts hosted 5,500 youth of color during the 2021-22 ski season. That figure represented all youth hosted by the company.

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