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Going for the Good

COMPETITION IS FIERCE AT THE WINTERKIDS DOWNHILL 24— ESPECIALLY FOR RAISING MONEY.

by SUSAN AXELROD **Photography by** MATT COSBY

Participants in the 2017 WinterKids Downhill 24, the Ski Your Buns Off team, ride a lift at Sugarloaf. The bunny and carrot costumes were not only fun; they provided an extra layer of warmth against the bitter cold.

It's 2 a.m.

at Sugarloaf, and an arctic wind whirls in icy gusts outside the base lodge, where the temperature hovers several degrees below zero. Most Loafers are in bed on this early Sunday morning, but a number of skiers are still on the mountain, where temporary lights along the wide Lower Narrow Gauge trail illuminate the blowing snow. Wearing extra layers, neoprene facemasks, white bibs, and timing chips, they race down the trail, some of them barely slowing at the bottom to get back on the chairlift for another run. These diehards, members of teams with names like the Powdah 11s and Who Kneeds Hamstrings?, have been skiing since 9 a.m. Saturday and will keep at it until the same time this morning. They are intensely competitive—vying for the fastest time and the most runs—but the primary reason they are on the mountain in the cold and dark is a philanthropic one. By 5 a.m., participants in the fifth-annual WinterKids Downhill 24 will have raised $267,000 for WinterKids, an organization with a simple purpose: to help Maine children develop healthy habits by getting them outside in the winter.

"It's a long season and our most sedentary season," says WinterKids executive director Julie Mulkern. "We did not coin this phrase, but we are firm believers that there is no bad weather, only bad clothing." While the organization's programs are focused on physical activities, there is also an emphasis on getting children away from screens and connected to the outdoor environment. "Kids can identify over 1,000 corporate logos, but they can't identify ten plants or animals native to their communities," Mulkern says, quoting a report by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management, which is cited in WinterKids literature.

Carla Marcus, a former Sugarloaf ski patroller and children's health advocate, founded WinterKids in 1997 as a learn-to-ski program. Called WinterKids Passport and sponsored by the statewide trade organization Ski Maine, it offered free lift tickets and lessons to Maine fifth graders. The passport has been expanded to include sixth and seventh graders and a booklet of free and discounted tickets to a variety of winter activities, including ice skating, tubing, snowshoeing, sledding, and dog sledding, in addition to cross-country and downhill skiing. Preschool to fourth-grade kids have their own version, the WinterKids FunPass, which allows them to try snowshoeing and cross-country skiing at no cost. "Carla saw the bigger picture and how we could broadly affect many more kids with outdoor physical activity options in addition to skiing," says Mulkern. "In two

Wearing their race bibs and timing chips, skiers wait to board the lift for another run. Sugarloaf's Lower Narrow Gauge trail was temporarily lit for the 24-hour event.

decades, 75,000 kids have had a WinterKids passport, and we are rolling out a native phone app for families and our winter sports partners in 2018."

WinterKids also works with schools in Maine and parts of New Hampshire to provide preschool and elementary school teachers with specific guidelines for incorporating physical activity into their lesson plans. The organization's Guide to Outdoor Active Learning (GOAL) is aligned with educational standards in both states, as well as with the Common Core. Schools are also encouraged to participate in the WinterKids Challenge, in which students and teachers agree to complete at least three GOAL activities per winter.

The organization focuses particularly on schools in Maine's poorer, rural areas. "The first year of the WinterKids Challenge, physical activity across the board increased by 64 percent," says Mulkern. "That's huge—and these are kids who do not usually go outside."

In January 2018, one elementary school

The sun lengthens the shadow of a solo Sugarloaf skier. **Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** WinterKids executive director Julie Mulkern. Young skiers brightly bundled up for a lesson. WinterKids racers carve a turn. The three bunnies get set for another run.

from each of Maine's 16 counties will compete in a new initiative, the WinterKids Winter Games. Schools can earn points for successfully completing a variety of activities focused on movement and nutrition. The top three schools win cash, and the three runners-up win prizes, such as winter equipment for the school. While the passport programs remain popular, the partnerships with schools have helped WinterKids to exponentially increase its impact. When Mulkern became executive director nearly eight years ago, the organization was reaching about 300 kids in schools. "Collectively, this year when all is said and done we will have reached 23,000 across all programs, half of which are in school," she says. "And what's notable about that is that we have four staff, but we know how strategic we need to be and we're very efficient."

Mulkern also touts WinterKids's robust board of directors, some of whom are participating in the Downhill 24. Longtime board member Will Stiles (board president from 2016 to 2017), an attorney with Verrill Dana in Portland, has skied in all five of the annual events. A veteran Sugarloafer, he was instrumental in moving the Downhill 24 from Mt. Abram to Sugarloaf in 2016. "Mt. Abram was the right place to start it, but as the event grew larger, we realized that we would need more on-mountain accommodations to meet the increased demand," Stiles says. At Mt. Abram, some skiers slept in tents or on picnic tables between runs. "Our first year, we raised $45,000, the second year was $55,000, and the third year was $70,000," he says. "Last year when we moved it here we raised $222,000, and it was a game-changer for our organization."

On this bitterly cold March weekend, 58 teams are participating in the Downhill 24, raising money via donations on a crowdfunding website. Even before they stepped into their ski boots, the competition was fierce, which Stiles used to up the ante. "I would see two teams that were $50 apart, and if I didn't know them I would email them and say, 'Hi, I'm Will Stiles, the board president. I want to introduce you to so and so, they're $50 behind you and coming up fast,'" he says, laughing. "It's amazing to see what happens when you do that."

Jeff Zachau of Zachau Construction in Freeport is known as one of the most competitive participants, along with Dan Cook of Allied Cook Construction in Scarborough. The two teams have been neck-and-neck in terms of fundraising, and at one point earlier in the evening, the men were interviewed by a local TV station about the rivalry. "We get involved in other things as a company, but this one's fun," says Zachau. "It's not a golf tournament, not an auction." A loyal Sugarloafer, Zachau refused Stiles's request to participate in the WinterKids Downhill until it was moved to his home mountain. "The first thing he said to me was, 'I'm in and I'm going to beat you,'" recalls Stiles. "And he did." In 2016, Zachau won the King of the Mountain award for the best combined finish in fundraising and ski racing.

Most teams ski in shifts, making sure that at least one member is on the mountain at all times with the timing chip strapped around a leg. Around the King Pine Room inside the Sugarloaf base lodge, skiers who don't have a bed nearby doze in sleeping bags against the walls, while others sit at tables drinking coffee and munching on energy bars, getting ready to head back out. Stiles's two sons, 15-year-old Eli and 11-year-old Ethan Rapkin-Stiles, and their all-kids team, the Gnar'Easters, are among the hardcore skiers who insist on going all night. "I pulled the kids aside and said, 'You know, it's going to be negative 12 tonight and windy, so we really want you guys off the mountain at midnight—you can go back at five or six in the morning,'" Stiles says. "'They said, 'We want to see if we can do this.' I spent the night making sure that they were OK—I didn't get much sleep.'"

When the 24 hours are up, weary yet upbeat skiers pile into the base lodge for breakfast, stripping off layers, a few men pulling chunks of ice from their beards. The 10 a.m. awards ceremony is supposed to be outside, but due to the temperature, it's moved into the Widowmaker Lounge. The less serious awards are first. The Rising Tide Brewing Company team wins the award for most team spirit, while the Ski Your Buns Off team—four bunnies that followed one carrot down the mountain—wins Best Team Costumes. Stiles himself wins for Best One Piece Ski Suit—an '80s-era neon pink and green number that he topped with an afro wig. He's also one of three to get the award for Best Trash Talker. Handed the mic, Stiles calls out the team appropriately named the All Nighters. The seven guys didn't take shifts; they all skied for all 24 hours, each clocking 72 runs. A team of eight kids, the Droppin' Franklins, wins for Youngest Team with the Most Runs—71.

When it comes time for the podium awards, the two construction companies and their owners are close. Team Allied Cook raised the most money—$34,590—but Dan Cook gets the silver ski boot trophy for individual fundraising. Team Zachau raised $29,336, while Jeff Zachau takes the top step on the podium, proudly holding the gold boot aloft. Another team—the Powdah 11s—tops them both to win King of the Mountain. They cluster around the podium wearing matching hockey jerseys with "Powdah" on the back and "Chiefs" on the front. "Our team tries to do this every year, but we don't do it because we want to get up here and hold this trophy," says team frontman Philip Alan of Salem, Massachusetts. "We try because all of us have kids, and we love to take them out and hit the mountain. Everyone's family deserves to do what we do."

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Members of the Droppin' Franklins team. Longtime WinterKids board member and past president Will Stiles. Casey Hilfrank, Jeff Zachau of Zachau Construction, and Tom Fremont-Smith of Winterstick Snowboards share a laugh in Sugarloaf's Widowmaker Lounge. **This page:** Members of the Powdah 11s, the winners of the King of the Mountain award for the best combined finish in fundraising and ski racing.

Before the big reveal of the fundraising total, Stiles takes the mic again to thank Sugarloaf and present a check for $12,312 to the Sugarloaf Regional Charitable Trust as a second beneficiary of this year's event. The kids from Droppin' Franklins come back on stage holding white boards that one by one they lift above their heads to reveal that this year's WinterKids Downhill 24 raised $273,126 (later increased to $283,000). Added to this, Tom Fremont-Smith of Winterstick Snowboards announces that he will donate one percent of his profits for 2017 to WinterKids.

By the time everyone files out of the Widowmaker, a regular crowd of Sugarloaf skiers is on the mountain, taking their first runs of the day in the bright, late-winter sun. Among them are more than a few white WinterKids race bibs, worn by Sugarloaf diehards who can always find time and energy for one more run.