

THE SMILING FACES OF MT. BACHELOR

Volunteer Mountain Ambassadors share a love of skiing and of helping others.

by Ronni Wilde, for *The Bulletin* Special Projects
Photos by Kevin Prieto



Ambassador Steve Coats greets Mt. Bachelor visitors with a smile.

Mt. Bachelor's Volunteer Ambassadors are said to be the smiling face of the mountain. The Ambassadors are tasked with being the first smile that visitors see when they arrive, and the last smile they see as they are heading toward their cars. They lend a helping hand any place on the mountain where anyone with questions might be, from the walkways leading to the lodges and the ticketing lines to the bottoms and tops of the ski lifts, and everywhere in between.

Although there are no age requirements to becoming an Ambassador, many of these friendly volunteers are retirees or older

adults who now work part time and have more opportunity to pursue their passions. By becoming an Ambassador, they have perhaps found the perfect blend of staying physically fit by participating in a sport they love while reaping the social and emotional benefits of helping others and making new friends with a common interest.

"We get a lift ticket that's good for the whole season, and a locker where we can store our skis and have access to the locker room," said Steve Jensen, 60, a retired property manager who has been an Ambassador for six years. It's very common, he said, for Ambassadors to wind up skiing together

on off days too, sometimes just by connecting in the locker room. "We commit to 22 days of duty, but we have some Ambassadors who end up with 100 days on the mountain skiing. These are the people you work with and you play with."

The camaraderie that develops between Ambassadors is so strong that some of them even take ski trips to Europe together, said Rebekah Warbington, a former Ambassador who became a Mt. Bachelor employee three years ago. As Mountain Services Manager, Warbington now oversees the Ambassador program, which started about 20 years ago with just a handful of people. Over the

past two decades, however, the program has grown so much that it has a reputation throughout the ski resort industry, she said. There are 90 volunteer Ambassadors on the current roster, with many more who would like to join the group.

"It's a very popular program, and turnover is low," she said. "People tend to stick with it. This year, we had 60 applicants, we interviewed 35 face to face, and we took on 15 new Ambassadors. We joke, saying, 'Once an Ambassador, always an Ambassador.'"

In addition to the free season pass and locker room privileges, Ambassadors also get a season bus pass, discounts on food and



Mountain Ambassadors volunteer their time to help ensure every mountain guest has a positive experience. Submitted photo.

beverages and a uniform. Applicants are interviewed annually in early fall, and the roster is set by October each year for the upcoming ski season.

"Usually, the applicants are vastly overqualified," Warbington said. "We have lots of retired business owners, law enforcement, airline pilots and military personnel. These are people who have had successful careers and now want to give back and spend more time on Mt. Bachelor sharing their love and enthusiasm for the mountain."

Though the program used to have more men involved than women, she said the ratio has evened out over the years as it has grown.

In order to become an Ambassador, the first requirement is a commitment of two training days and 22 on-duty days (or five days per month December through March) plus at least two days in April. Duty days begin at 8:30 a.m. and end at 4:00 p.m. Ambassadors are required to have a current certification in First Aid, CPR and AED, and are required to join the National Ski Patrol's "Mountain Host" program, which costs \$55 for the annual membership fee. Ambassadors are expected to be capable of skiing or snowboarding down any run on the front side of Mt.

Bachelor in any kind of weather.

"Ambassadors have to have the ability to be out in all weather conditions. They need to be hearty and sturdy," said Warbington. "This is not for the faint of heart."

Although the Ambassadors do not personally render medical aid to injured skiers, Warbington said they do work hand in hand with ski patrol.

"We are often the first person on the scene, and we make it clear we are not ski patrol. But we call ski patrol and we stay with the person until patrol arrives. We also secure their safety until patrol arrives, making sure they are out of the way of danger."

Ambassadors do "storm loops," which involves skiing around the mountain on low-visibility days to help shepherd skiers down when they get in over their heads or can't see well enough to get down the slope on their own. The Ambassadors wear what Warbington refers to as "highlighter" or "lollipop" green jackets so that they are easy to spot on even the foggiest of days.

While the physical requirements of the job are important, Warbington said the most crucial part of being an Ambassador is the hospitality component, coupled with familiarity of the mountain and of

Bend in general.

"Our mission statement is to provide hospitality, information and incident management," she said. "Ambassadors have to have an outgoing personality and a spirit of service and volunteerism. The most fulfilling part is helping people."

Warbington said that in her experience as an Ambassador, she caught people leaving the mountain because they weren't having a good time, but after showing them options, they wound up staying and enjoying the day.

"Our program is renowned in the industry because it's more interactive and there's more outreach. We approach people who look lost."

Jensen said that a typical day on

duty as an Ambassador involves assisting people new to the mountain who need help finding their way around.

"Half the crew will be stationed at the bottom of the hill where people can easily find us in our bright green coats," he said. The goal is to minimize a guest's waiting in line time and help them get through the entry process as quickly as possible, whether it's getting children checked into day-care or signed up for ski lessons, getting a cup of coffee or finding the nearest restroom.

"Once on the hill, the mountain is big, so the next question we help with is where people should ski," Jensen said. "We offer suggestions and help people avert disaster by



Ambassador Don Gordon enjoys a friendly conversation with a skier during a volunteer shift at Mt. Bachelor.

getting them onto appropriate runs for their skill and interest levels. For the more advanced skiers, we tell them where the best snow can be found on that day."

Once the newcomers have been assisted, Jensen said the Ambassador's second-tier priority is to



Tom Bales is one of 90 Volunteer Mountain Ambassadors.

be an extra set of eyes and ears on the mountain.

"We just keep an eye on things, like calling the janitorial staff when a bathroom needs attention," he said.

The Ambassadors have been so good at what they do over the years that the Mt. Bachelor management team has found another role for them: helping with tour groups.

"The Mt. Bachelor group sales reps travel around the country suggesting that various ski and snowboarding clubs come here, and they tell the groups about the people in the green coats who will offer free tours around the mountain," Jensen said with a laugh.

"We are developing a reputation around the country for our tours available at no charge," he continued. "To have a hospitality team like this is unique to Mt. Bachelor. Group sales are always very supportive of what we do because it helps drive sales."

Jensen said his favorite thing about being an Ambassador is not



Volunteer Mountain Ambassadors take photos for families and groups of friends visiting Mt. Bachelor. Submitted Photo.

the skiing, it's the involvement he has with people.

"Working as a Mountain Ambassador creates more interest for me because it adds the dimension of being of service to other people. It's not just about the skiing," said Jensen, adding that he enjoys welcoming newcomers to the mountain and helping them have the best day they can have.

"The confidence that comes with having someone welcome you to the mountain community and say, 'Here, let me show you' improves the quality of the visitors' experience by a whole bunch," he said. "This is the meat and potatoes of what we do. The big things we do aren't necessarily big things; they are a bunch of little things."



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