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A NOTE FROM AMC'S PRESIDENT, NICOLE ZUSSMAN

Dear Friend,

We're halfway through the year, and I find myself looking forward and back. You have created in AMC a rich history of building community and protecting natural resources. You're also driving AMC's future by bringing new friends and partners into the fold, and speaking up for the outdoors. One thing that remains constant through the past, present, and future is our unparalleled ability to connect people to the outdoors. AMC is a people-oriented conservation organization; we exist because of volunteers, members, and donors like you. When you share environmental policy issues that matter to you, the rest of the organization rallies to provide the advocacy and education to support your grassroots campaigns. I'm excited for you to read in this issue how your advocacy translated into conservation policy wins this year.

I'm also inspired by the way AMC leaders demonstrate how the outdoors is for everyone. Our feature story dispels misconceptions about who can participate in outdoor sports. Supporters like you make it possible for AMC Guides to host and coordinate joyful and meaningful experiences for groups like New England Ski for Light. We believe in a virtuous cycle that by getting people outside, it will foster a love for the outdoors that creates more advocates for the protection of critical landscapes.

Full article:

"A Shift in Perspective: New England Ski for Light and AMC's Outdoor Journey Fund"

by Matt Morris

When people talk about the outdoors, they often talk about the sights: the way a mountain looks from the trailhead, the change in vegetation as they climb, the view from the summit. For people who hike without the use of sight, different perceptions emerge: the way the mix of warm sun and whipping wind feels on a peak, the texture of the rocky trail beneath their feet. This is what it feels like for the blind and visually impaired adventurers on a New England Ski for Light (NESFL) hike. NESFL has been organizing adaptive outdoor programs since 1977, beginning with cross-country skiing and expanding to offer hiking, tandem biking, kayaking, and rock climbing outings. The New England chapter shares a name and mission with thirteen other Ski for Light affiliates from California to Japan.

"[We're] people with all kinds of life experience, but just don't have the opportunity to get outdoors because of the physical barriers that blindness presents for doing so safely. It's an amazing experience to have those barriers lifted and really get out into nature," says Susan Bueti, New England Ski for Light's President.

AMC is one of their key partners to get there. For the past two years, New England Ski for Light has hosted its Winter Wonderland hiking trip at AMC's Highland Center at Crawford Notch in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Lodging, food, and gear rentals are supported through AMC's Outdoor Journey Fund, created in partnership with L.L. Bean. Supported by generous donations and grants, the fund offers lodge-based accommodation, gear, and guides at significantly reduced rates for community organizations dedicated to bringing underrepresented groups outdoors. AMC's Outdoor Journey Fund supported twenty-three trips in 2023, helping 420 participants to enjoy the outdoors.

While New England Ski for Light offers financial assistance, Bueti acknowledges that some potential participants may be scared off by the initial price tag or not want to accept aid. With the support of the Outdoor Journey Fund, the organization can offer a low flat rate and attract new hikers.

"It really helps to boost the spirit of the experience over the financial barriers," adds Bueti.

For this year's trip, held over President's Day Weekend in February, visually impaired participants and seeing guides ascended Mount Pierce, a 4,300-foot peak in the Presidential Range of New Hampshire. It's a challenging winter route for anyone, visually impaired or not. On hikes like these, participants rely on guides for auditory cues to their surroundings, including information about footing or upcoming obstacles like stream crossings. It's a relationship that relies on mutual trust and empathy.

"The respect, kindness, love, and admiration exhibited between guides and blind and visually impaired participants is what keeps me coming back, said participant Maurie Hill.

Hill is an experienced hiker who had given up on the activity due to vision loss. She said attending this hike helped her regain confidence and get her boots back on. She wasn't alone. Participant Jennifer Harnish said the hikes were a chance to not only return to the outdoors but to accomplish something new.

"I grew up enjoying outdoor adventures with my family, and the two Highland Center trips provided the guiding support and camaraderie to bolster my self- confidence and to achieve a summit goal that I had never done even with vision."

Many of the guides are also AMC chapter volunteers. In fact, the AMC Boston Chapter Ski Committee defrays some of the costs for their members to guide with NESFL.

The trips from the Highland Center were staffed with many volunteers from AMC'S New Hampshire Chapter.

"When trained AMC guides came to the scene, it was clearly a match made in heaven. They have been fun, energetic, and professional," said Hill.

The feeling from the guides was mutual. Many said they came away seeing the outdoors in a new light. (They) continually impress upon me a need to expand my ideas of what 'normal' is in the outdoors, on snow, or on the rocks and roots of summer trails; in the Highland Center negotiating the buffet line and toasting the day's hike with a glass of wine... Above all, I gained new friends who also hunger for more chances to be outdoors in the forests and mountains of New Hampshire like I do, said guide Debbie Marcus.

"At the end of a trip like this, many of the participants thank us volunteer guides [for] making it possible for them to do this. But it's equally true that without them, we don't get to do this. And it's that mutuality of it that I find so special," added guide Steve Powell.

For participants and guides alike, these events are a reminder of all the ways we can appreciate and experience the outdoors. Losing one sense doesn't have to mean losing the whole experience. It requires a shift in perspective.

"Listening to babbling streams, and feeling the terrain change, and being in the weather, and smelling conifers. Feeling the texture of different kinds of moss. It's just such a multisensory experience. It's unbelievable," says Bueti.

Photo Captions:

1. New England Ski for Light participants and AMC Guides hike to Mount Pierce in the White Mountain National Forest, New Hampshire.
2. Visually impaired participants and seeing guides ascending Mount Pierce, a 4,300-foot peak in the Presidential Range of New Hampshire.