

STORY BY ANITA RAFAEL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BARNUM



BART ADAPTIVE SPORTS CENTER

When you ask Joe Hurley, the founder and executive director of the Bart J. Ruggiere Adaptive Sports Center at Bromley and Stratton mountains, "What is the secret sauce that makes the Bart Adaptive Sports programs so successful?" he says, "No question. It's the kind of volunteers we have. The way our instructors truly care for our participants and earn their trust is the key to why and how we run the programs. It takes a lot of compassion."

And then, when you ask Steve Kerstein, a volunteer who has returned to teach skiing for the second season at Stratton, the same question, he answers, "The secret sauce is definitely Joe Hurley's leadership and training. He is so in-tune with what people with physical or cognitive challenges are going through in their day-to-day lives. He fully grasps what it takes to teach children and adults with disabilities and special needs. Joe understands their functionality in a way that is fundamentally different than what is generally offered in adaptive programs."

Steve, who lives near the resort and is home-based in Westchester, New York, is a retired management consultant. He joined Bart Adaptive Sports as a ski instructor last season, which was the first time the organization's ski and snowboard lessons were offered at Stratton. "I had never done anything like this before," he says. "The Bart Adaptive Sport's intensive volunteer training for the sports instructors, which takes place in December each year, is also what makes this such an impressive program. It really does make a difference. We practice methods and teaching techniques on each other before we ever meet our students. I realized I could, in some ways, put myself in the shoes of my students."



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BART ADAPTIVE



This winter, same as last season, one of Steve's all-star students in the adaptive ski program is the intrepid Alexandra N. from Manhattan, New York. Alexandra, who will be 9 years old in March, has a rare disorder that impacts her muscle tone and coordination, making her participation in sports, including skiing, a challenge. She skied 11 weekends last winter with Steve, and before the season ended, she was ditching the magic carpet to ride the gondola to the peak, using ski poles for the first time, and schussing Duck Soup, a narrow intermediate trail. "I have no doubt," Steve says, "that because of her determined attitude and will to learn, along with the tremendous support she gets from her parents (as well as her twin sister, who is in the racing program at Stratton), that Alexandra will soon be skiing every trail on the mountain. She is actually a very good skier! Where we have the most success with children is in cases where the parents have very realistic goals."

Lisa, Alexandra's mother, says, "Our wish is to be able to all ski together, and to spend quality time as a family. Alexandra likes the way the program at Stratton sets goals that encourage her to be independent, which is her goal in life, too." Lisa learned to ski at Stratton as a

THE BART ADAPTIVE SPORTS CENTER

The organization was named after Bart J. Ruggiere, a New York City-based stock trader who lost his life at age 32 on September 11 during the World Trade Center attacks. Because Bart loved to ski, his family and friends formed a foundation in Bart's name to support people with special needs through an adaptive sports program.

HEROES

The Bart Adaptive Sports Center's 17th annual Wounded Military Heroes Weekend is Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, February 7, 8, and 9, 2020. The weekend is three days of fun, featuring skiing, snowboarding, competition, camaraderie, and a fabulous dinner celebration. It is a meaningful, inclusive way to honor the bravery and sacrifice of veterans who were disabled during their service. It is an expense-free weekend for a group of nearly 20 heroes and a guest they may wish to invite.

Bart Adaptive Sports Center relies on local host families, in part, for housing for the weekend and believes it is a wonderful way to unite local residents with some of America's bravest men and women.

youngster, and thanks to Bart Adaptive Sports and the Stratton Mountain Ski School, both her daughters are doing the same. Lisa summarizes, "Their great relationship with our daughter, and with all of us in this family, is the cornerstone of their program."

Joe Hurley, a Bennington resident, launched adaptive skiing 19 years ago at Bromley Mountain in Peru, Vermont. At first he just offered lessons to special needs children. Now, Bart Adaptive Sports Center has programs for adults, as well as snowboarding, adaptive cycling, golf, and kayaking. He says, "Our ongoing hurdle is not figuring out how to teach people with physical, cognitive, or emotional differences how to enjoy these outdoor activities—it's getting enough volunteers to meet the demand. Last year, we had six or seven volunteers at Stratton who taught a combined 126 lessons, mainly on weekends and over the holidays."

"When we're on the trails, we wear our Bart Adaptive Sports logo vests or jackets, and people are aware who we are," he says. "Their immediate impression when they see that our participants are having such a great time on the mountain, perhaps blasting down Snow Bowl seated in a bucket seat while steering and turning with out-rigger skis, the immediate perception might be 'I like that!' or 'Wow, that's really cool!' Some skiers come over to ask us how they can help our program." One of the ways individuals, businesses, and corporate sponsors assist the Bart Adaptive Sports Center, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, is by ensuring ample funding is available to provide scholarships for lessons and activities. Joe says, "For instance, there are a number of children from the Stratton area who take ski lessons with us, whose families could not otherwise afford to enroll their child in adaptive one-on-one lessons. "Just apply, and we'll figure out something."

Apparently, "figuring out something,"—or that is, everything—is what Joe is



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BART ADAPTIVE

particularly good at. As the sports-loving father of an equally sports-loving daughter born with spina bifida, Joe promised his daughter Betsy, who, now at 38 and a college grad, works as the center's administrative staff, that he would make it possible for her to do any activity she wanted.

He has kept his word to Betsy, the two of them discovering along the way that the promise-keeping, when it comes to outdoor sports, requires bold creativity, profound ingenuity, risk management, and, as Joe says, "a lot of nylon strapping." Last summer, Joe and Betsy—she in her wheelchair—happily went standup paddle-boarding together. "I made it work," he says.

"I have a closet that is full of gear, including duct tape, plus all sizes of accessories and equipment that we mix and match to accommodate the individual we are teaching," Joe says. "None of what we need for our participants comes off the shelf from a sporting goods shop, so we have to improvise. Something as simple as a little plastic wheel with handholds, tethered to two straps can become the perfect nonverbal teaching tool." As for his credentials on the slopes, Joe is certified by the Professional Ski Instructor Association as PSIA-E Level Two Alpine, PSIA-E Level Three Adaptive, and PSIA-E Clinic Leader Adaptive Board of Education.

This year, the Bart Adaptive Sports programs that Joe and the center's volunteers continue to develop are expected to provide more than 525 winter lessons and more than 75 summer experiences.

Jim Lawler is president of the board of Bart Adaptive Sports Center. Jim also teaches adaptive lessons on the mountain, along with two of his children, who also volunteer as instructors. He lives in Stamford, Connecticut but has a

family home in Dorset, as well. Years ago, Jim enrolled a third child with disabilities in adaptive ski programs starting when she was about 10 years old, and that is how his involvement with Bart Adaptive Sports began.

Jim says, "Having adaptive sports at Stratton Mountain shows that the resort cares and truly wants to welcome everyone, regardless of ability. It has opened its arms to all families, and it's a huge opportunity. Because of the Bart Adaptive Sports programs, the resort is enabling people with disabled family members to enjoy being together doing something they all love." 🍷

ALL THE DETAILS

Bart Adaptive Sports Center
A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.
Program enrollment forms and volunteer applications online at bartadaptive.org.
802-824-6849
PO Box 2232
Manchester Center, VT 05255

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Volunteer!

Some of the benefits that the volunteer instructors receive are additional lift tickets donated by Stratton Mountain and Bromley that can be used any day.

Donate!

You may earmark a donation for any or all of the following: equipment, military heroes weekend, scholarships, or to cover expenses for Bart Adaptive Sports Center's major fundraising events and administrative operations.

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