

The Unrecables **FWSA Tollaksen Outstanding Club of the Year, 2007**

The Unrecables (Unlimited Recreational Ability) is a non-profit sports organization for people with disabilities. We are the Los Angeles Chapter of "Disabled Sports, USA" (a 501(c)(3) organization) and have just over 100 members. We provide a safe environment where people with disabilities are encouraged to grow and improve their skills. Through skiing, people with disabilities are motivated to overcome physical and mental barriers by accepting the challenge of the sport itself. As their confidence and skiing improves, the instructor presents new challenges to overcome. This confidence, physical skill and endurance spill over into their daily lives, improving day-to-day motor skills as well as adding to the overall quality of life for the disabled athlete.

The Unrecables primary focus is downhill skiing during the winter. *The Unrecables* began with a handful of volunteers and a few disabled students in 1980. This year during the winter program of 2005-2006, we provided over 200 hours of student skiing with over 1000 hours of volunteer instructor time. The club offers adaptive skiing and instruction for people with all types of disabilities, i.e., visually impaired, deaf, amputees, brain injured, paraplegic, quadriplegic, and cerebral palsy. We arrange weekend trips to the Mammoth Ski Resort once a month from November to May.

Over the years *The Unrecables* have done all of the tried and true fundraising efforts, and we will continue to do so. We've had 3 adaptive devices donated in two years' time, we've been the beneficiary of many ski clubs' graciousness and consideration of their fund raising efforts and equipment donation, and we've been remembered in wills. We have been very blessed these past few years.

But the turn of events that came about after our treasured member, Helen deBerard, visited an REI store in her area last year, has changed our group for the better. REI is an outdoor gear and equipment store, and Helen was seeking the donation of some ski helmets for our adaptive trips we make to Mammoth Mountain every month during the ski season. The manager referred her to Alaina Cunningham, the Outreach Specialist at the Manhattan Beach, CA store.

Alaina explained to Helen that individual stores no longer donate directly to charitable groups. Instead, REI has a well-established grant process for those groups who are first nominated by a REI employee. This program is called "REI Gives". Annually, REI dedicates a portion of its operating profits to help protect and restore the environment, increase access to outdoor activities, and encourage involvement in responsible outdoor recreation. REI employees nominate organizations, projects, and programs in which they are personally involved to receive funding or gear donations. We made arrangements for Alaina and 4 other REI employees to attend the February 2006 ski trip with us to see first hand the good work we do. They skied in Bi-Skis, skied with their eyes closed (to simulate a V.I. skier), and met several of our disabled members and our volunteers. They of course nominated our group for an REI Grant. We submitted a basic form to their headquarters, and a few weeks later we received the approval to submit the formal grant proposal.

The formal grant proposal. That in and of itself was quite an interesting prospect. We're just a volunteer group – a group of folks who love to ski, who love to help others, and who take the time to make our organization and monthly trips work. But writing a grant proposal? This was going to be interesting. First, I contacted our Ski School Director, Scott Nakada, and our then

Winter Trips Director, Michelle McCarthy. What did we need? What did we want? We needed to show empirical data of our past trips, and formulate increases based on the data. Did we keep numbers of past trips? Between the three of us, and the (thankfully) straightforward online grant request form from REI, we had a basis from which to start. Of course we want to benefit more individuals. Of course we want to improve our equipment status. Of course we want more PSIA certified volunteers. But to quantify them all in one place – that was a goal in and of itself. We talked, we met, and we sent emails to each other. And I wrote. And wrote. And in a short period of time, we did it. We had a plan. And whether we would receive the grant or not, it was an excellent exercise because we knew what we wanted to do, where we wanted to go, and what we needed to do to make it there. We needed equipment such as new outriggers, VI radios, helmets and more. We wanted to PSIA-certify at least 5 more instructors. We wanted to provide the funds for the trip costs for several students this year since many of our members are in the low-income bracket and can usually only attend one trip per year.

Putting the numbers together, we researched our historical data. The records kept by Michelle were excellent. We knew the number of volunteers and number of students for each trip going back over 5 years. I put together a table of data and together we decided on a reachable goal of a certain percentage in increase of students and volunteer hours. We made a list of much-needed equipment.

We submitted the grant request, and waited for the answer. But we did not wait and do nothing. This analysis stirred something inside of us. The plan of action that we would need to employ should the grant come through made us realize we can do more and help more people, and be more organized about it. We had been functioning very well with lots of success for years and years, thank-you-very-much, but seeing the plan in black and white did something more. So without hearing what the answer of the grant request was, we still put in place the steps to increase our volunteer figures and PSIA certifications, and published the grant proposal to the membership.

However, we did receive the REI grant! We purchased outriggers, shocks, radios, and more. We had students attending trips who would not have without these funds. We held instructors' clinics in members' homes and on the mountain to help facilitate the goal of having 2-3 people per year for the next 3 years receive their The Professional Ski Instructor Association (PSIA) certification, and we had 4 people receive new certifications this year alone! But it does not end there. Every month of this past season we monitored our grant status. We checked up on ourselves. We know how many people needed to attend each trip per our goals, and we met and beat those numbers!

The moral of the story? Any organization, volunteer or otherwise, needs a business plan or a plan of action, and the fortitude to monitor those goals. It leads to greater efficiency, cohesiveness in the group, and it fosters a stronger sense of team spirit. Setting goals and a plan of action, sharing the vision with the membership and regular follow-up to see where are and where you want to be. Change the goals along the way if they are not working or not realistic. And finally, be resourceful when looking for a fund-raising partner. It's amazing what one question at one (terrific) store by one member did for our group. Because of our friends at REI, we are well equipped – the best we've been for as long as I can remember in the 17 years I've been a member. Because of our ability to put together goals in the grant proposal, our team that has been so strong and dedicated for all of these years has an even stronger sense of togetherness and team spirit that I didn't believe could be increased. And for that, I am grateful to REI for bringing out even more of the best of us.

In addition to the grant from REI, we held fundraisers to support our general fund for overall support of the organization. We had the first annual Silent Auction at the Los Angeles Council of Ski Clubs' Snow Gala, and we plan to do the same this next year. This is also part of our strategic goal for our club. Not only will the Silent Auction generate much needed funds for our club, but it will also spread the word out in the community that we exist – so perhaps new members can join our great group. A good percentage of the Snow Gala attendees were from our organization, including a new member that joined as part of our REI grant goal to increase membership. We also sold Entertainment Books, and benefitted from the program offered via Ralph's grocery store where a small percentage of the total grocery dollars spent by shoppers registered with our group are forwarded to us. We continued to actively seek new individuals to register as "our shoppers" and the efforts paid off. We received checks for \$300 to \$500 each quarter this past year!

We also had several people, both long time and new members, attend the Los Angeles Council of Ski Clubs ski week in February of this year. The trip was in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and for those who attended the event, they had a fantastic time, made many new friends and had a very memorable trip.

This is a common reaction for our trips: we all have a great time together, make new friends, and have memories to last a lifetime. We enrich each other's lives, are thankful for what we do have and can do, and enjoy the sport of skiing, regardless of our financial status or physical ability. Being a part of such a group and having our student members trusting our instructors and candidates to improve their skiing ability really helps the students to gain the confidence to overcome physical and/or mental barriers. This spills over into their daily lives and has so many far-reaching implications. As our motto states, "If I can do this, I can do anything!"