

THE COURAGE OF VISION

SUN VALLEY SKI ACADEMY CELEBRATES 10 YEARS!

words by ANNIE POKORNY '11, CUTTHROAT FOR LIFE + TYPE 2 FUN DEVOTEE

PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE DAWSON PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF U.S. SKI AND SNOWBOARD

PHOTOGRAPHY: HILLARY MAYBERRY

DASHA ROMANOV '20
U.S. ALPINE SKI TEAM

The slow rumble of a mid-night snowplow still brings a certain sense of potential and eagerness to me. As a deep sleeper with the type-A habits of a Nordic skier, I'm rarely up in the middle of the night. However, I will always welcome the roar of a nocturnal snowplow. The sound not only inspires an expectant thrill, but also a deep nostalgia for me. My first winter in Ketchum was a big one. The season of '09-'10 began with a slow creep, with the Nordic team driving north, clear to Prairie Creek, in search of enough snow to ski. However, that January saw feet upon feet of snow. As a new kid at Sun Valley Community School and on the Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation (SVSEF) ski team at the height of adolescent insecurity, I found comfort in the regular songs of the snowplows in the night. I lived on a sleepy corner of West Ketchum, and came to recognize the specific tune of the

plow turning on our cross street. The sound was a salient reminder that I was in the right place at the right time. I had come to ski, and there was skiing to be had.

At 17, I came to Sun Valley from Spokane, Washington, to ski with SVSEF. My home club at the time had a lot of heart, but not a lot of infrastructure for aspiring elite athletes. Before coming to Sun Valley, I spent my winter evenings in Spokane driving the hour commute from my 2,000-person public school to get on snow. Headlamps were my training partners, and late nights were my routine.

The winter of '09-'10 was my experiment. I moved to Idaho for the storied ski club, as well as the famous trails in Sun Valley.

I was just here for the winter, planning to return to Spokane for the spring and my senior year of high school. **That plan changed when my mom**

shared that someone from Sun Valley Community School wanted to have a phone call with me.

I remember studying the West Ketchum cliffs outside my window as I awaited the call. I memorized the lines and trees and stoops that held snow above vast drops. I examined the drama in the rock bands, and considered what a contrast the view was to my suburban home in eastern Washington. When my mom handed me the phone, Andy Jones-Wilkins introduced himself as the Head of School. He'd heard that I had come to the area to train and compete for skiing, and wondered if I knew that Sun Valley Community School was considering starting a ski academy. (I didn't.) He then asked if I'd consider joining the program as a pilot student? (I would...)

I said yes before I knew I was speaking. It came from my heart, as so many decisions do at that

age. I committed to applying, to transferring schools, and to joining what would become a growing population of the not-yet-named Sun Valley Ski Academy (SVSA). The night that I was accepted, the plows got on the road earlier than usual, and I wrote in my journal that the universe had given me its blessing. I was one of a few other students joining the school to pilot the program, to share feedback on our experience pursuing elite athletics while attending the school. Our job was to propose schedules and adjustments so that, if the school decided to pursue the idea, other student-athletes might have the same opportunities after us.

When I joined the Sun Valley Community School student body that fall, I was immediately challenged by the academics, and humbled by the outdoor skills of my peers. I had competitors in other parts of the country for whom attending a ski academy

meant that they essentially didn't have to attend school at all. It became very clear, very fast, that scenario would not be the case at SVCS. **The philosophy grew clear to me: being a serious athlete was not going to buy me a hall pass from pursuing excellence as a student or community member. This school wanted to develop my whole person while also allowing me (and, yes, encouraging me) to compete at the highest level possible.**

Throughout the year, I had regular meetings with Andy Jones-Wilkins to share feedback on my experience. When I missed school days due to a training camp or race, was I able to keep up with my work? How can I adjust my schedule so that I can train twice a day? Would it make a difference to have a training facility on campus? A tutor? What could it look like if there were a boarding

CHASE JOSEY '13

U.S. SNOWBOARD TEAM + OLYMPIAN

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JOHNNY HAGENBUCH '20
U.S. CROSS COUNTRY SKI TEAM + 2-TIME JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPION



JACK SMITH '19
U.S. ALPINE SKI TEAM



SYDNEY PALMER-LEGER '20
U.S. XC SKI TEAM + JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPION + 2-TIME NCAA CHAMPION

program? These meetings were fun and creative, and allowed me to weave and bob through a brand-new program with the support of the school. I also remember this being the first time an educational institution had asked for my opinion.

My time at the school shaped how I thought about skiing in my future. With the help of brilliant teachers and inspired classmates, I realized that I could pursue academics alongside athletics without feeling singularly defined by either. I learned that one's value is more than a grade or an outdoor accomplishment or a ski result, and that developing all parts of myself allowed me to positively define my self-worth beyond the results sheet. I held onto this lesson through the ups and downs of my ski career, channeling perspective on the days when I wasn't skiing well.

As I travelled and raced, I kept a hopeful eye on the ski academy as it grew. First, it got a name, then it got a handful of athletes, many of whom I saw atop results lists and national team rosters. The boarding program was intro-

duced at the school, and soon I heard that there was an entire training facility built into the dorm. I knew athletes who graduated from SVSA, regularly on podiums at Nationals or NAAs, and many more going forward to make a difference in their non-skiing careers and communities. With each update and addition, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity I had been given to share a piece of the program, even if it was unofficial.

Today, there are 73 students enrolled in SVSA. There is a stunning and versatile residential hall (Rufus M. Brown Hall) and the state-of-the-art Julia Argyros Training Center (a U.S. Ski and Snowboard-designated High Performance Center) at the dorm. These are athletes from the Wood River Valley and beyond, many of whom, like me, came to Sun Valley for the support and access that this local ski community brings. My time at the school is still very much a part of me, and helped

bring me back to the Wood River Valley. As I write, I'm looking out my window at the same band of cliffs I studied before my call with Andy Jones-Wilkins. Today, I live a block away from where I lived in high school, although this time I came here for much more than the skiing and school. I'm here for the way of life and the community that supports it. The cliffs are not (yet) snow-covered, but their drama still strikes me and reminds me of my extraordinary opportunity just to be here. Each winter, I have the privilege to hear the sound of the snowplows turning on this sleepy corner of West Ketchum, reminding me that I am right where I am meant to be.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: HILLARY MAYBERRY / MIKE SCHIRF PHOTOGRAPHY

SVSA TIMELINE

1985-1988 SVCS had a brief run with a boarding program, but did not gear it towards snowsport athletes.

1980s-1990s A number of student-athletes moved to the valley for the school and ski programming, but there was no formal ski academy.

2010 Four pilot ski academy students join Sun Valley Community School. The groundwork for the partnership between Community School and Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation is laid.

2011 Sun Valley Ski Academy receives a name, an office, a director, a staff, and its first set of pioneer students. The barn at the Sagewillow Dumke Family Campus is renovated into the Airbarn—a state-of-the-art training center for aerial athletes.

2017 Rufus M. Brown Hall and the Julia Argyros Training Center open to welcome boarding students to live and day students and athletes to dine and train. At Sagewillow, a roller-ski machine and roller-ski paths are added to the training facilities for the cross country program.

2018 The Julia Argyros Training Center is designated as an official U.S. Ski and Snowboard High Performance Center, one of very few in the nation. Also hired a High Performance Coordinator to train student-athletes.

THE COURAGE OF VISION

THE FOUR FOUNDERS + THE WILD WEST DAYS



KIPP NELSON, FOUNDER

IN 2011, the Sun Valley Ski Academy officially formed. It was a brainchild of **Kipp Nelson** and **Steve Shafran**, who shaped their shared vision through many days on the ski lift. They were inspired by the rich winter sports history in Sun Valley, as well as a deep desire to

maintain and grow the vitality of the town and school in the onset of the Great Recession. Their vision was shared by **Jack Bunce** and **Gary Black Jr.**, both of whom were former SVCS parents and trustees for the SVCS and SVSEF Boards respectively. The four founders, as they came to be called, rented an office off Trail Creek



FOUNDER, STEVE SHAFRAN WITH JONNA MENDES + SCOTTY MCGREW

and hired two-time Olympian and World Championship medalist Jonna Mendes to recruit athletes to the program. Thus, the ski academy launched into its energetic and fast-evolving start.

"When I was hired, 100 percent of my job was recruitment," says Jonna, now the Sun Valley Ski Academy Program Director. She moved her family from New York City at the promise of the ski academy, and joined forces with former Director of Residential Life Jess Wasilewski '98 to bring the program to life. "We put ourselves out there, through the never-ending efforts of Jess as well as a great network of people who got the story out. We also had our cohort of pioneer student athletes who took the leap with a new ski academy at its youngest."

In that first year, those pioneer students moved into the building we now know as the Hot Water Inn, a former hotel updated into a student dorm through the creative "renovation efforts" of Jess and Jonna, clearly not contractors or architects! Meanwhile, Shafran and the three other founders built a business plan

to purchase the Knob Hill Inn to serve as a dorm. While that purchase fell through, the business plan and capital campaign had energized the community around the idea of a ski academy. Then Shafran and Nelson re-joined the SVCS and SVSEF Boards, respectively.

"That's when the partnership began to form and really mean something," says Shafran. "We were living through this exciting, entrepreneurial spirit. Each of us was working to make this thing work through the partnership of SVSEF, Community School, and this new thing we called the ski academy." After the first year, SVSA formally became a part of Sun Valley Community School. Enrollment increased, and SVSA was attracting athletes from across the region, the country, and the world, including the program's first international skier, a Swedish alpine skier who was a remarkable addition to the school community. These student-athletes were excelling in their sports and wanted additional support and infrastructure to succeed as students and athletes. They began taking advantage of the summer school program to plan around their racing schedules,

PHOTOGRAPHY: KRISTIN CHEATWOOD PHOTOGRAPHY



GARY BLACK, JR., FOUNDER

while faculty updated their lesson plans to allow for the flexibility and support that the student-athletes needed while traveling. Word spread and the program grew, and everything that the founders had envisioned—a world-class training facility paired with excellent academics—clicked into place.

In addition to the opportunity provided to SVSA students, the school and broader community benefitted as well. New perspectives arrived in the classroom, and local athletes enjoyed the benefit of the talent infusion of their new teammates. A robust boarding program developed, local and new athletes were elevated in their pursuits, and the school worked to accommodate training and racing. It was the development and realization of the partnership between the school and SVSEF that Shafran is most proud of now. "As I sit here and think about the relationship between Jonna, Ben Pettit, and Scotty McGrew at SVSEF, I'm appreciative of their camaraderie and commitment to the same goal," says Shafran. "True partnerships aren't easy, and they've realized a level of engagement together that's making an impact for the entire Wood River Valley."

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF GARY BLACK, JR. FAMILY / JACK AND ELIZABETH BUNCE



pictured with his wife, Elizabeth

JACK BUNCE, FOUNDER

BY THE NUMBERS

- 3** Junior World Championship Titles
- 7** U.S. Ski + Snowboard Team Members
- 27** NCAA Division I athletes (Alpine + Nordic)
- 27** Regional Championship Ski + Snowboard Podiums
- 29** Junior National Championship Titles
- 130** Total graduates of Sun Valley Ski Academy from 2011-2021

MORE PEOPLE BEHIND THE DREAM

Sun Valley Ski Academy has become the ski academy to watch because of the vision, generosity, energy, wisdom, and effort of many who supported both Sun Valley Community School and Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation. It is impossible to name all of the people who made SVSA possible, but here are a few. Thank you for your belief in the possible and your courage to dream big.

- + Sam Adicoff, former SVSEF Board Member
- + Liz Brown, friend of SVSA + SVSEF
- + Rob Clayton, former SVSEF Executive Director
- + David Holmes, former SVCS Head of School and Trustee
- + John Perenchio, former SVCS Board Chair
- + Joanie Swift, former SVCS Board Chair
- + Don Wiseman, former Executive Director of SVSEF and former SVCS Trustee
- + Stephanie Shafran, friend of SVSA + SVCS
- + Jimmy DeWolfe, former SVSEF Board Chair
- + Jonathon Neeley, former SVSEF Board Chair
- + Jen Milgard, former SVSEF Board Chair
- + Jim Milgard, former SVCS Trustee
- + Peter Curran, friend of SVSA + SVCS
- + Scotty McGrew, Executive Director SVSEF

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RYDER SARCHETT '21
U.S. ALPINE SKI TEAM + 2-TIME JUNIOR NATIONAL CHAMPION



PHOTOGRAPHY: HILLARY MAYBERY



JESSE KNORI '12

JESSE: SECOND FROM LEFT

ALUMNI HIGHLIGHTS

MARC LEROUX '14



Marc LeRoux '14 grew up skiing out of Vancouver, B.C., where the faculty and staff were excited for his alpine ski racing success, but weren't necessarily supportive of him missing class to travel and compete. Living in a city, he also didn't have back-door access to the ski lifts, so he had to balance a commute with his school and training schedules. His parents discovered SVSA through friends in Sun Valley, and encouraged him and his sister to visit the school during the winter of his 10th grade year. "Sun Valley is a pretty special place. It was eye-opening for me, to see so many kids living such rich outdoor and athletic lives,"

says Marc. "I couldn't turn down the opportunity to ski and go to school, and feel completely supported in both." Marc enrolled as a boarding student his junior year, joining a cohort of then-56 student-athletes including many local ones. **The remarkable difference for him was the level of support offered by SVCS faculty and staff to help him complete his work while competing. "If you give kids the chance and support to get everything done, they will," Marc says. "It was the first time in my life that I was given space to get it all done, and it made school and training so much more**

fulfilling. Whether it was through advanced planning with Jonna, or office hours with my teachers, I felt like everyone wanted me to succeed. I've taken many of those early lessons of time management with me into my academic and professional careers." After graduation, Marc attended CU Boulder and completed degrees in accounting and business administration. He now lives in Victoria, B.C., and is the co-founder and director of Pivit, an online coaching platform for remote instruction between everyday athletes and elite coaches.

In 2011, the Sun Valley Ski Academy was named and so, too, was its first set of student-athletes: The Pioneers. One such pioneer was cross-country skier Jesse Knori. Jesse had come to Sun Valley the prior summer from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to train with the SVSEF summer program. She never left. "While I loved my school and program in Jackson, there wasn't a strong female racing presence there at the time, and I was thinking through what my training options would be for my final year of high school," she says. "When I came to Sun Valley that summer to train, I heard about the upcoming launch of the ski academy. It felt serendipitous, and I immediately applied." Jesse reflects on the experience of

joining the young program as a privilege. In that inaugural year, she regularly shared her feedback and ideas as the program began its ascent. "I feel like I got to be a builder. Everyone was so open and hungry for feedback to make it all work." **Jesse remembers the little things that made a big difference to her. How Doug, the SVSA chef at the time, would come on Nordic racing trips and make sure that the athletes had the proper fuel through their rigorous training schedules. How Pilar Lindahl, parent of co-SVSA student Zachary '13, would work with her after hours to finish assignments**

ahead of big trips. Jesse was a new kid in town, navigating a new school with green independence, but had a network of people looking out for her. "The entire experience really prepared me for college," says Knori, who attended CU Boulder and graduated with a degree in environmental design and landscape architecture, as well as two All-American NCAA titles. "I got to ski somewhere and pursue my athletics, but also foster my other aspirations. At SVCS, I didn't have to be just one; for ski academies that's super special." Today, Knori lives and works in Jackson Hole. She is a designer at BLRB Architects and still finds time to get out on the trails. +