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FIRST DESCENTS VISITS CRESTED BUTTE

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LIV Sotheby's INTERNATIONAL REALTY

Young adults living with MS ski with Adaptive Sports Center

By Kendra Walker

On a bustling Friday afternoon in Mt. Crested Butte, a group of friends happily digs into their lunch after a sunny morning of skiing, taking in their third-level views of the mountain. Cheeks rosy and glowing in a way only a day out on the slopes can bring, these friends celebrate their skiing accomplishments from the day and take some time to relax with a welcoming break out of their ski gear. Most of them have never skied before this week. In fact, none of them even knew each other before they got to Crested Butte. But the satisfied smiles say it all: the memories and friendships created here this week will last for years to come.

This Crested Butte ski vacation is a special one. The participants are a group of eight young adults from across the country living with multiple sclerosis (MS), visiting Crested Butte under First Descents' first-ever MS skiing program, hosted by the Adaptive Sports Center.

"This is our first skiing program and we're doing it in Crested Butte," said First Descents lead staffer Emily "Paco" Hansen. "First Descents' mission is to take young adults impacted by cancer or MS and provide them life-changing outdoor adventures," she said. "We're healing through adventure."

First Descents has worked with Adaptive in the past for ice climbing and summer programs. "Our goal this week is to build connection and relationships and find common ground," said Hansen. "Our participants can finally share with other young adults dealing with MS and build that community."

Hailing from Chicago, Pittsburgh, Virginia, Ohio, Toronto, Washington, D.C. and Denver, the group came in this week with a variety of skills, said Hansen. Some of them had never even seen a pair of skis before. "But we wanted to get everyone on something they were initially uncomfortable with." For some, that was putting on skis and sliding onto the magic carpet, and for others it was graduating from a green run to a blue.

Aside from skiing, the group spent time exploring town, snowshoeing up Cement Creek and eating specialized meals designed to help their diagnosis, all cooked onsite at Adaptive by chefs brought in by First Descents. Staying at Adaptive's new Kelsey Wright Building, the group had the opportunity to enjoy all the amenities of the new lodge.

"I don't think we could ask for anything better, to be slopeside like this," said Hansen. "To be able to come in and relax and take a break from skiing, Adaptive fits our needs perfectly."

"This location is amazing to be able to ski out the door," said participant Emily "Red" Reilly. "And when you wake up you look at the mountains right there."

Reilly grew up visiting Colorado and hiking, but had never been to Crested Butte before this trip. "I'm a mountain girl," smiled Reilly, who has lived with MS for 14 years. "The program has really exceeded expectations. It's really unique meeting everybody in a setting like this and to interact with young people who live with MS. We've become a mini-family over the course of five days. And they don't let MS stop them. I want other people who are diagnosed to know that anything is possible."

Reilly has enjoyed pushing herself on skis. "The instructors are amazing. They're encouraging and so supportive and really make you feel you can do anything."

Kassie "Whiskers" Devlin had never skied before, but found ease here in Crested Butte. "I appreciate the community here—everybody has been so nice and so encouraging," she said. "Even strangers on the mountain are constantly encouraging."

Back home in Pittsburgh, Devlin is used to an older demographic in her support groups. "This week has been so fun and super rewarding, getting to meet other MS patients in my age range. I also wanted to prove to myself that I'm still capable of doing these physical activities."

Andy "Coach McCringleberry" Beatty had also never skied before, but was impressed with his Adaptive instructor's ability to ski backwards while helping him learn.

"They got me down a run I call 'Murder Row,'" he joked. "One of the biggest challenges right after I was diagnosed was that everyone was telling me what I can't do or stuff I should stop doing. I was going to learn how to be disabled," he said. "But one of the things that's so cool about this experience is they'll never say 'No, you can't do that.' They're going to figure out a way to make it happen so that I can do it. I can still do it."

Amber "A-Track" Johnson, who had not only never skied or been to Colorado before, had never even heard of Crested Butte. "I never considered myself a nature person," she laughed. "I was a little nervous in how I would fare." But coming from the hustle and bustle of D.C., she found Crested Butte to be a much-needed recharge.

Sharing this experience with others has inspired her. "We've been authentically connecting really quickly, whether encouraging one another or going through challenges together." Johnson plans to stay connected with First Descents and participate in local programs back home. "In D.C. I don't really have a good network of people with MS. I want to share and pay it forward." She also hopes to go on a program trip several times a year, and make it back to Crested Butte in the summer.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary of programming, Hansen said First Descents couldn't have asked for a better collaboration than with Adaptive to run their first MS ski program. "We've been working on the Adaptive partnership for quite some time," she said. "To partner with them and to be here in Crested Butte has been truly valuable."

And perhaps this week's visitors can teach us all a little something about overcoming life's challenges. "I would encourage more people, not just within the MS community but with any type of limitation, to challenge themselves like this," said participant Reilly. "It's the most empowering feeling to experience and there's a lot of victory in overcoming those obstacles. Living with MS is like skiing down a hill—there's uncertainty and fear but you just take one turn at a time, one day at a time."

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