

A NEED FOR AFFINITY

Words EMILY SULLIVAN WITH JUDITH KASIAMA
Photos PAVEL BOIKO

WHEN JUDITH KASIAMA started skiing two years ago, she didn't see any skiers who looked like her. A Congolese woman living in Vancouver, BC, she felt out of place at Whistler Blackcomb. "It seemed like it was a white people sport," she recalls. "If you don't see anyone who looks like you, it's hard to believe you can do it."

Rather than feel discouraged, she set two personal goals: work to become a good skier and create opportunities for other Black women to try the sport.

Last winter, Judith organized and participated in her first backcountry skills clinic, taught by professional skier Christina Lustenberger. Judith's organization, an affinity group named Colour the Trails, brought six Black, Indigenous, and women of color to Rogers Pass, BC to learn terrain management, avalanche assessment and touring technique. Participants cheered one another up the skin track, taking weight from each other's packs if someone was struggling. "It was about community," Judith says. "We made sure that everyone made it to the top together."

The three-day, beginner-friendly course encouraged participants to build trust and be themselves without the pressure of outside judgement. "I'm still really shy about my skiing, but I felt safe in that environment," Judith says.

Designed for people who share a common identity or experience, affinity groups create welcoming environments that foster learning and break down systemic barriers. They can unite people based on gender, race, sexual orientation, disability or any combination thereof. In a homogenous sport like skiing, those spaces can be few and far between.

According to the most recent data from Snowsports Industries America, 68.7 percent of skiers in the United States are white and 66.4 percent of frequent skiers are male. For skiers whose identities fall outside these demographics, both representation and access to mentorship are sorely lacking. "Skiing is not really encouraged within the Black community,

It never crossed my mind that I, Judith, could be skiing," Judith says. "I didn't know where to start. People say they want to help, but they don't want to give up a good powder day to take out new skiers."

While affinity spaces are not the all-encompassing solution to inequity in skiing, they have the power to advance opportunities for underrepresented skiers to become guides, instructors and industry leaders.

Perhaps the best-known organization created by and for skiers of color, the National Brotherhood of Skiers, was founded in 1973. Made up of more than 50 Black ski clubs across the United States, NBS is one of the largest ski organizations in the country. "Joining NBS caused me to ski more than I would have otherwise," says Todd Hood, vice president of NBS Western Region. "Participants have an opportunity to be with people who don't just look like them, but who also live like them. That's the joy of it."

Todd has surveyed Black skiers across several online forums and his research shows that Black skiers who ski at NBS events feel significantly more welcome at resorts than those who ski independently. Independent Black skiers, on the other hand, report feeling ignored or simply tolerated on the slopes.

"We don't want to have to code-switch when we step on the mountain, even subconsciously. That's exhausting," explains Deenaalee Hodgdon, a Dene-Sugpiaq skier and Coalition Snow athlete. Code-switching, or adjusting one's style of expression to appease a dominant culture, promotes a dangerous homogenization in the winter sports space. Climbing beyond that slippery slope, Deenaalee has created an Indigenous scholarship fund, providing Native skiers with gear and opportunities to attend Indigenous snowsports clinics. Deenaalee says Native-led courses can provide healing spaces for Indigenous people to connect on the land. "There's power in shared identity because you don't have to focus on trauma," they add.

A group of Colour the Trails skiers making its way into the Rogers Pass, BC backcountry. Hayden, Judy, Myia and Sandy 30 minutes away from the start of their first line of the day. Great conditions, tasty snacks and incredible views.



JennaMae, Judy, Myia, Niasha and Sandy on a search for a backpack with a beacon buried in the snow before a four-day backcountry trip near Revelstoke, BC. No backpack was harmed or left behind, and stoke was high.



Todd explains that though the National Brotherhood of Skiers is nearly 50 years old, the ski industry is just starting to catch up to them. Most large ski associations did not previously have race, equity, or inclusion on their radars. Now initiatives are popping up across the industry, helping organizations like Colour the Trails fundraise and obtain gear for their operations.

“We didn’t join NBS clubs to march for civil rights. We joined to go to ski resorts together and get good deals on lift tickets,” Todd says, laughing. But he recognizes that NBS creates opportunities that impact the industry. The NBS Western region recently introduced a Cultural Harmony Initiative, adopted by the Far West Ski Association in December 2020. The initiative will support cultural bias education for predominantly white ski clubs while increasing funding, training and speaking opportunities for skiers of color. “If we don’t do it, it won’t get done,” Todd says of the initiative. “Or, even worse, it will be done in a manner that doesn’t address the issue.”

Judith and Deenaalee echo that in order to affect meaningful change, affinity spaces must be created by and for the communities they serve. In addition to Color the Trails and NBS, successful programs such as EDGE Outdoors and Indigenous Women Outdoors follow this model. “Action within the industry right now is centered around the violence impacting Black, Indigenous, queer and trans bodies,” says Deenaalee, adding that it feels reactionary. “What happens when there isn’t violence, when we focus on joy and healing?”

As industry partners look to support affinity initiatives, Judith says it’s important to “find someone who is already doing it and pour your resources into their program, so it can thrive.” In the past, she used personal funds to get others on the slopes as cheaply as she could. With support from brands and resorts, Colour the Trails is able to do much more. Meaningful investment in accessible, inclusive initiatives creates opportunities for future generations.

Judith knows this isn’t just a moment or a trend and looks forward to a not-so-distant time when backcountry skills clinics are commonly taught and guided by Black women and other underrepresented individuals in skiing. “Sometimes I question if I want to keep skiing. It’s hard, it can feel like I’m not progressing,” she explains. “But seeing the joy of women of color skiing together, it’s a beautiful experience. It makes me feel like this is where I’m meant to be.” ¶