

IN PROFILE



JUDY KASIAMA

Judy Kasiama is an open book. It's easy to find flow in conversation with her—her charisma and contagious spirit exemplify her approachable nature. Calls with Kasiama are always peppered with laughs and sidebars, and though we've never met in person, her voice and cadence provide a soothing familiarity when we talk. While video chats, Zoom panels, and virtual meetings are a staple of her career as the founder of affinity organization Colour the Trails, Kasiama always balances screen time with a healthy dose of mountain adventure.

A Canadian immigrant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kasiama's path in life has been far from linear. After a tumultuous childhood followed by years of moving around North America, she carved out a meaningful role for herself as a mountain athlete and community leader in Vancouver, British Columbia. Kasiama didn't discover her love of mountain biking, hiking, or skiing until adulthood, but she excels at nurturing all aspects of her identity.

Words By Emily Sullivan

Art By Jenilee Marigomen



A quick scroll through her Instagram account reveals that she feels as natural in five-inch heels and power suits as she does in ski boots and Gore-Tex.

Kasiama doesn't dwell in the comfort of the familiar—a true innovator, she embraces risk and harnesses momentum for change. Through her work at Colour the Trails, she channels her energy towards a future in which Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are equally represented in the outdoor industry. Her philosophy seems simple enough: "Community starts with an invitation," she often says. But her approach to sustainable advocacy sets her successes apart.

Trail runners are taught to focus their vision a few strides ahead, anticipating and preparing for obstacles in their path. In advocacy, Kasiama has mastered this skill. When she started a "Colour the Trails" Facebook group in 2017, Kasiama was determined to create revolutionary change in the outdoor industry. Exhausted by the dominant narrative which implied people of color don't participate in adventure sports, she set out to increase participation and visibility for her community. "I wanted to highlight that there is a diversity of people in the outdoors," she explains, "but there's often a lack of access or mentorship for people of color."

What started as a small community group on Facebook quickly blossomed into organized group hikes, snowshoe outings, and ride-sharing. With a focus on mentorship and accessibility, Kasiama ran clinics and affinity programs with her own personal capital, slowly building relationships and trust within her community. She used her online platform to speak out against brands who perpetuated harmful stereotypes about people of color in the outdoors and establish relationships with brands who could support her initiatives. With time, she realized her passion project could become her career.

With input and support from friends, community members, and her partner, Kasiama decided to leave her full-time job and incorporate Colour the Trails as a business in 2019. With an eye on enduring momentum, Kasiama knew she needed a sustainable business model to create lasting change. Always one step ahead, she plotted a path of freedom and flexibility in order to avoid the burnout that so often accompanies advocacy work.

"In the past I worked in the nonprofit sector, and there was always an aspect of ego from donors," she explains. "They wanted to support charitable initiatives in Africa, but they also wanted a clinic named after them. In a way, that felt more like conquest than a community initiative."

Kasiama says that her goal with Colour the Trails is "to support opportunities for others, with a model that doesn't uphold white supremacy". She explains that nonprofits are often unsustainable, with problematic hidden costs for staff and volunteers. Their funding structure relies on grants and donors, creating a power hierarchy in which communities of color are held in a position of need. "It doesn't build wealth within the community," she says.

Instead, Kasiama opted to create a sense of ownership for Colour the Trails members, who now comprise a rich community of mountain bikers, trail runners, backcountry skiers, and hikers who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color. "We work really hard to subsidize for the community, but we want members to buy in," Kasiama says.

As an athlete, Kasiama knows that mentorship is a two-way street. She explains that in her personal mentorships in mountain biking and skiing, both parties put in the effort and energy to create a meaningful relationship. On her own time, Kasiama practices new skills to ensure that the time spent with mentors is beneficial. "It's not me sitting on my bum all winter long," she explains with a chuckle. "My eagerness and willingness to learn is key," she says.

"I'm trying to build that with Colour the Trails. People who are willing to put in time and energy—who really love the sport—benefit most from their memberships. Their investments in the organization create more opportunities for the community."

This concept of community ownership stems from Kasiama's ancestral roots. "There's a tradition in African communities," she explains, "of sharing wealth within a community to build whatever your dream or desire is. The funding comes from community members. When one idea is successful, they move on to the next person's idea."

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Kasiama’s progressive vision and self-awareness contribute greatly to the success of her initiatives: through their sustainable approach, Kasiama and her team have built momentum for five regional Colour the Trails groups across Canada.

But Kasiama’s long-term vision is much greater than increased participation and representation for people of color. She looks forward to a time when current Colour the Trails members mentor youth skills clinics, guide clients up mountains, and teach avalanche courses. “The more young people we reach, the more [they] will see there is a path for them within the outdoor industry. Whether you’re a writer, or in conservation, or guiding—you can work in the park system or the outdoor industry. We want people to know that opportunity is out there. Our hope is to see more BIPOC leaders in those spaces.”

And in true Kasiama fashion, she is three steps ahead of the industry as a whole. She only partners with brands who are willing to invest in her community, and she avoids tokenizing or extractive relationships. “Colour the Trails is leading in terms of policy innovation and change, holding brands accountable so that the storytellers, writers, videographers, and photographers are also people of color. All of that plays a key role in how we move towards a more inclusive culture,” she says.

Kasiama’s desire for a vibrant and just future for people of color in the outdoors is contagious. The energy she cultivates within her community carries enough momentum to truly transform the industry. For her, this work is not about ego or financial success. It’s about opening doors and exploring unknowns on her path to shape the future. “There is so much opportunity—Colour the Trails can go in so many different directions. For me, it’s also about learning how to grow,” she says.

When it comes to next steps, Kasiama plans to continue to innovate. “Who knows what the next years will bring,” she says, laughing. “Little by little, we will keep building up.” And she’s absolutely bringing her community along for the ride. “Colour the Trails is us supporting us,” she says. “When people take these opportunities, we’re excited to see what doors will open for them.” ☺☺



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