Arn Menconi, founder and executive director of SOS Outreach, stood on the stage overlooking the middle school auditorium in Edwards, Colo. “On the count of three I want you to shout our motto,” he said to the standing crowd. “One … two … three.”

“Spread the love!” shouted the kids and parents.

Founded in 1993, SOS Outreach is a nonprofit organization that introduces at-risk and underprivileged kids to skiing and snowboarding. Headquartered in Avon, Colo., SOS set a goal of reaching 3,500 children ages 8 to 18 this season. To do this, SOS partnered with 40 resorts in nine U.S. states, Canada, and New Zealand. The resorts range in size from Colorado’s Vail Mountain (big) to Wisconsin’s Mt. LaCrosse (small).

The kids and parents came to this middle school on a beautiful Saturday in October for the orientation meeting for SOS University, the most intensive of a range of programs SOS Outreach offers. The kids in this auditorium committed to four years of skiing and riding, along with community service projects.

There’s a formula industry leaders know all too well. Declining Baby Boomer participation rates plus changing U.S. demographics equal this: the industry needs to get minorities into snowsports. The faces in the auditorium today are not the faces that have usually been seen on the slopes for the past 80 years. That picture puts hope into industry leaders.

The challenge is twofold: introduce minorities to snowsports and turn them into lifelong enthusiasts.

It’s undeniable that mentorship is the secret sauce. You take passionate and compassionate people and you’re going to have a lot higher conversion.

—Arn Menconi, founder and executive director, SOS Outreach

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Minorities make up 66 percent of SOS Outreach participants, according to Menconi. The nonprofit attracts kids through local public schools in each area in which SOS Outreach operates. Teachers identify kids who are struggling or who need an extra boost, and then encourage them to get involved with SOS, says Program Manager Justin Behravesh.

From there, SOS staff and volunteers make it as easy as possible for the kids to get on skis and snowboards for the first time. They provide clothing, equipment, and instruction— all for a nominal fee.

Resorts take notice of the program’s effectiveness in smoothly getting kids to the mountain and ready for lessons. The entire community outreach program at Colorado’s Arapahoe Basin is designed around SOS Outreach, says Snowsports School Director Burt Skall. When a church or youth group calls wanting to get their kids on the mountain for a day, the resort steers the group toward SOS.
A-Basin donated instructors, lift tickets, and season passes last season for 91 SOS Outreach kids, a value of more than $50,000, according to SOS Development Director Seth Ehrlich. Skall feels SOS is able to leverage Arapahoe Basin’s contribution to magnify the effect better than churches and other youth organizations could do alone.

“We see a lot more SOS kids stay with the sport than we do with the one-time church-style groups,” Skall says. “They walk away feeling good about Arapahoe Basin, feeling good about their instructors, and feeling good about themselves.”

THE SECRET SAUCE
“It’s undeniable that mentorship is the secret sauce,” Menconi says. “You take passionate and compassionate people and you’re going to have a lot higher conversion.”

Consider Tonya Solis, a 20 year old who has worked with SOS Outreach for eight seasons. She began in the organization’s Learn to Ride program – the entry-level offering that involves five on-hill days and three community service days. She stuck with all the programs and is currently an adult mentor. She remembers what her mentors did for her and now wants to do the same for the kids under her charge. One of her jobs this fall is calling up first-year participants to introduce herself and make sure they have everything they need for day one.

“You talk to them about how their schoolwork is going, what their goals are inside and outside of SOS,” Solis says.

Solis feels the key benefit of SOS Outreach is its focus on giving back (remember the “Spread the love” motto). “It’s great because it shows the kids that they can give back to the community when the community is giving to them at the same time,” says Solis.

The benefits of mentoring are twofold. First, it gets the kids more committed to the program … and therefore more committed to snowsports. Second, it improves their life skills and makes the kids more likely to increase their future socioeconomic status (and be able to afford to go skiing and snowboarding as adults).

THE PROOF IS IN THE NUMBERS
In 2007, Boulder-based research firm RRC Associates led a survey of past and present SOS Outreach participants. The study showed that 25 percent of SOS Outreach participants will both go to college and become active winter sports participants as adults. College is an indicator of their ability to afford ski and snowboard trips in the future, according to RRC Associates Director Nate Fristoe.

Twenty-five percent lifetime conversion, (a conservative estimate, Fristoe says) is twice the industry rate, according to NSAA data for a similar minority youth segment. What’s the key to these results?

“They’re staying with it,” says Fristoe. “It’s not a one-time experience. [Participants] not only go multiple times within a season, but there’s a doorway for multiple years of participation.”

Challenge: The snowsports industry needs to match the changing demographics of the United States by introducing minorities to snowsports – and converting them to lifelong participants.

Solution: SOS Outreach targets at-risk and disadvantaged kids and introduces them to snowboarding and skiing through mentorship programs. The longer exposure time (ranging from one to five seasons or more) means more first-timers become lifers. The focus on mentoring also means these kids are more likely to go to college, raise their socioeconomic status, and be able to afford ski and snowboard trips as adults.

Results: One in four SOS participants will become lifelong snowsports enthusiasts as adults. That is double the industry average for a similar youth demographic.

First lady Michelle Obama took her daughters, Sasha and Malia, to Ski Liberty Resort, Pa., over the Presidents Day holiday and made a second visit weeks later. Resort Marketing Director Anne Weimer says that on their first visit, the Obamas arrived at 9:15 a.m., and the girls spent the morning with instructors. The girls were able to ski on their own after lunch, Weimer says, adding that no slopes were shut down, and the first family waited in line with everyone else.

“Unfortunately, they requested that we not take any photos, and with Secret Service around, you respect their requests,” says Weimer.

“It was their first day on snow, and they all really excelled,” she adds. “They were linking turns and going down our most challenging green trail! Feedback from our contacts after the fact has been that they really enjoyed their day – especially the fact that they were able to enjoy the day together as a family without a lot of fuss. Hopefully we made skiers out of them! Camp David is only 30 minutes away – maybe they’ll be back often!”

Obamas Hit the Slopes
EXPANDING UP, OUT, AND AROUND

Looking into the future, SOS sees even more opportunity for growth – particularly upward growth. It has realized some of its overall success by creating programs that allow kids to increase their level of involvement over the years. Beginning with the introductory Learn to Ride program, there’s a clear path leading up through the four-year SOS University all the way to becoming an adult mentor. Now the nonprofit has its sights on sending its core participants to work in the snowsports industry.

SOS is working with the Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA) and the American Association of Snowboard Instructors (AASI) to provide instructor training for SOS Outreach members. Using the same philosophy to introduce kids to snowboarding and skiing, SOS focuses on lowering the barriers to entry for instructor training. “The training has to be brought to them,” Menconi says.

Last year, SOS put its first handful of members through training to earn certification as ski and snowboard instructors. Those efforts were ramped up this season to get more members through the process, Menconi says.

The organization also expanded to year-round operations. Last year, SOS merged with a summer-based nonprofit called Meet the Wilderness, enabling it to offer programs for its kids throughout the year.

In January, leaders in the winter sports industry gathered with politicians and representatives from outdoor recreation groups to announce a bold initiative to get 100,000 kids involved in outdoor programs each year for the next 10 years.

The Recreation Outdoor Initiative (ROI) comes on the heels of First Lady Michelle Obama’s recently formed campaign to combat childhood obesity, and featured a similar anti-couch appeal.

At the announcement, Susan Alden, who represented the U.S. Forest Service, said kids today spend less time outdoors than any previous generation.

“A study came out recently that showed kids aged two to five are watching 32 hours of TV a week. That’s a full-time job,” she said.

More than 100 students from the Denver area attended the event, held in conjunction with the Snowsports Industries America (SIA) tradeshow, before heading to the mountains to spend the afternoon skiing and snowboarding. The event also served as a capstone for Learn a Snowsport Month.

David Ingemie, president of SIA, said, “ROI shows what can happen when industry leaders step up and decide to make a meaningful change.” ROI is an apt name for the initiative because by taking steps today, we can help ensure a return on our investment by making a connection with the next generation,” he said.

Intrawest CEO Bill Jensen said he was pleased to take part in ROI because it offers an opportunity to connect with the next generation of skiers and riders and brings together groups with a variety of interests.

“It demonstrates a firm commitment by resorts, manufacturers, retailers, government agencies, and nonprofits to work together to achieve a common goal: to create a new, healthier generation that has a passion for sports and the outdoors,” he said.