NSAA HONORS SIX RESORTS, SAFETY CHAMPION WITH 2015-16 SAFETY AWARDS

BY REBECCA W. AYERS, EDITOR

THE NATIONAL SKI AREAS ASSOCIATION announced the six winners of the annual Safety Awards during a special reception May 19 during the NSAA National Convention and Tradeshow in Nashville, Tenn.

The awards, sponsored by Safehold Special Risk, recognize the exceptional initiatives resorts implement to educate guests and employees about skiing and snowboarding responsibly—not only during Safety Month in January but throughout the year.

Also honored is the new Safety Champion, which recognizes a resort employee who shows outstanding dedication and enthusiasm toward educating and promoting safety to guests and employees.

Here is a look at the 2015-16 National Safety Award honorees and their programs. NSAA congratulates them for their commitment to skiing and snowboarding safety.

BEST OVERALL SAFETY PROGRAM

(350,000 or more visits) Mammoth Mountain, Calif.

People often glaze over when scanning words and images that never seem to change, especially when it comes to safety messaging. Mammoth Mountain is minimizing that tendency with a common sense approach: spotlight one safety goal per month, convey it in a humorous, non-preachy manner, and place the messaging strategically for undivided attention whenever possible.

Mammoth’s success with this method is evident where it matters most: in a decrease in incidents despite an increase in skier/snowboarder visits compared to the same timeframe the prior season.

Each month the resort sent out a company-wide email outlining the designated theme (e.g., December’s message was “Make a Plan: Find Terrain that Suits Your Ability”) along with tips on how to relay the message to guests, followed by a related poster and other collateral. The goal was to provide talking points that would resonate with everyone, whether a 20-year-old lift attendant or a 60-year-old guest, said Gabe Taylor, the resort’s marketing manager.

The themes appeared on digital ad boards and other signage throughout the resort, on cards distributed at lodging check-ins, on a dedicated safety webpage, and on social media channels, radio spots, and daily snow reports. The resort also leveraged its California Passholder Early Ups program (exclusive early-morning lift access followed by a complimentary breakfast) and junior safety program as ideal platforms to incorporate the messages with captive audiences.

Mammoth emphasized the themes on its terrain parks webpage and created a trail map to help guests find the correct park for their ability level. Another popular initiative was a voluntary “speed trap” (offered under the busiest chairlift). Guests were timed while skiing/riding, and were usually surprised to learn their actual speed—a great segue way into safety discussions. The resort also distributed 1,000 goggle wipes imprinted with Your Responsibility Code and hundreds of beans to anyone that knew the safety message for the month.

Mammoth said the 2015-16 safety campaign is its most successful yet, citing fewer incidents and more positive feedback, including this from a longtime guest: “I think of the ‘Make a Plan’ sign a number of times during each day I ski.”
BEST OVERALL SAFETY PROGRAM
(Up to 350,000 visits)
Ski Apache Resort, NM

When Ski Apache rolled out its volunteer ambassador “Yellow Vest” program midway through the 2014-15 season, only two people signed on. By 2015-16, the roster had grown to 36, guests were expressing positive feedback, and Apache had increased its focus on this valued extension of guest relations and safety education.

Wearing unmistakable bright-yellow vests stenciled with “Ask Me/Mountain Info,” the volunteers do more than tell people where to find the cafeteria. Participants undergo an in-depth orientation that delves into topics such as the Skier Safety Act of New Mexico, Your Responsibility Code, and helmet and lift safety. They learn about when to contact the patrol, how to mitigate hazard areas, and how to provide speed control and assist with trail sweep.

On busy days the volunteers are a prominent sight at the base area, carrying an “Information” sign. They always have slips of brightly colored paper (usually attached to a piece of candy) with Your Responsibility Code and the patrol phone number, and they hand them out at the ticket window, in slow zones, and at lunchtime on the patio. They also give out safety stickers and breakaway season pass holders imprinted with the Code.

In addition to the extra guest service focus, the Yellow Vest program helps free up other departments such as the patrol and ski school to spend more time on their designated areas on the mountain, said Fred Pavlovic, the resort’s ski patrol and risk manager.

All volunteers commit to working at least eight hours a month, but most of them willingly exceed that amount. They receive a free lift ticket for each day worked; those who work 15 or more days get a season pass.

“The surprising fact is that most of these people who are volunteering can easily buy a season pass,” Pavlovic said. “Most of them live more than 100 miles away, and it’s quite obvious that they love skiing, being outdoors, and enjoy helping people that come from all over the world.”

Ski Apache’s Yellow Vest volunteers clearly demonstrate the attitudes and aptitudes to raise safety awareness and enhance guest services.

BEST EMPLOYEE SAFETY PROGRAM

Aspen Snowmass, Colo.

It’s rare for employee injuries and workers’ compensation rates to drop dramatically two years in a row, but Aspen Skiing Company has done just that. With a history of successful employee safety programs, ASC already had seen a 30 percent decrease in staff injuries across its four resort properties since 2011, but when the rate reached a four-year plateau, the company knew it could do even better.

ASC expanded its wellness programs with its Mind-Body-Spirit (MBS) initiative three years ago, but in 2015-16 decided to take it a step further and also adopt the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Total Worker Health program—a model for injury and illness prevention to advance worker wellbeing. As a result, employee
injuries dropped another 25 percent and workers’ comp costs decreased by nearly 50 percent over the prior season.

ASC learned about Total Worker Health through the Roaring Fork Valley Health Alliance, a consortium of large employers working to advance the health of residents. NIOSH’s affiliate in Colorado, Health Links, helped ASC assess its activities and identify areas needing improvement (of which there were few—NIOSH recognized ASC as a Business Leader, the highest level of certification available). From there, ASC further expanded efforts into job design and personnel policies and practices.

Aspen now addresses employee wellness, safety, lifestyle, and work as a whole package, and has a Wellness Steering Committee and Humanities Advisory Board. Other changes include extended paid parental leave for both parents; more allowances for sick days to include caring for others; the availability of stand-up desks; nutrition coaching; healthy food alternatives; and comparing employee biometrics to the bigger Valley population to help drive changes in local healthcare options.

A primary indicator of success is a noticeable cultural shift in the workplace, said Steve Howard, ASC’s director of safety and wellness. “Conversations have turned from ‘I have to do this’ to ‘I want to do this,’ whether it’s how an employee climbs a lift tower, warms up and stretches before housekeeping, or models healthy lifestyle choices,” he said. Kudos to ASC for moving from a parental-like compliance model toward a lifestyle choice model.

**BEST GUEST SAFETY PROGRAM**

**Boreal Mountain Resort, Calif.**

With a high volume of on-snow terrain parks, BMX parks, and skate parks, Boreal Mountain Resort (BMR) has a lot of incentive to emphasize park safety education to users of these different venues at Boreal Mountain and Woodward Tahoe.

More than 90 percent of BMR’s guests are from Northern California—one of the country’s most diverse and rapidly changing populations—and the company prioritizes developing messaging that maintains relevance across this broad cultural and generational spectrum. A strong focus on NSAA’s Park SMART guidelines, delivered with a local touch, is helping ensure a safe, enjoyable environment for all participants.

This past season, BMR's cross-functional Action Team created a video for each letter of Park SMART, and featured the footage for five consecutive “Safety Sundays” on the resort’s two Instagram pages: Borealmtn and Woodwardtahoe. Each video featured a different park team member highlighting that week’s safety emphasis (beginning with “Start Small: Work Your Way Up. Build Your Skills”). Popular athletes from the Tahoe community were often recruited to help demonstrate the themes. At the end of the series, BMR combined the segments into a video compilation and posted it on the resort’s web page and on YouTube.

BMR released the compilation across multiple platforms, connecting to a larger, more diverse audience throughout various points of their experience. “A priority of focus at our resorts is to educate as many guests as possible on safety messages before they arrive, and the Safety Sunday videos were a great way to provide early education on park safety,” said Amy Ohran, general manager.

By innovating the way the resort connects with guests through their preferred channels, primarily social media, Boreal been successful in emphasizing the safety message behind Park SMART, Ohran said. This has bridged a gap between new park riders, experienced park riders, and even staff members.

BMR’s Park SMART videos received 27,000 views on Instagram alone, and they’ve given staff more tools for actively engaging with guests to promote safety awareness. “Connecting park safety to relatable personalities and media content has enhanced the awareness and overall experience in our terrain parks,” Ohran said.
When kids raced outside for recess at local elementary schools near Copper Mountain last winter, a colorful van pimped out with eye-catching logos and a practice chairlift seat mounted on the back got a lot more attention than the monkey bars.

As part of its Stick to the Seat chairlift safety outreach program, Copper used the van to provide an interactive way for kids from kindergarten through fifth grade to learn about the importance of the proper way to load, ride, and unload a chairlift. Supplementing NSAA’s Kids on Lifts chairlift safety program, Copper’s new Stick to the Seat initiative is designed to teach kids that the chairlift at ski areas is not a place to be silly, but a time to sit back, put the bar down, and enjoy the ride.

In the past, Copper has provided safety presentations in a crowded auditorium with young kids itching to move around, said Mike Russo, the resort’s risk and safety manager. Alternatively, the Stick to the Seat outreach program is introduced at a time and place where kids are having fun anyway, and the van itself served as somewhat of a safety message magnet. Kids stood in line with their friends for the chance to check it out.

After learning tips about chairlift safety, the young participants picked up chairlift safety stickers on their way back to class. Their enthusiastic engagement in the exercise was clear indication that the message was getting through to them, Russo said.

Congratulations to Copper for finding a fun, interactive way to get kids to sit down and listen to a message that is sure to be remembered every time they visit the slopes.

**SAFETY CHAMPION**

Linda Bowling, Sun Valley Resort, Idaho

Sun Valley Resort’s guest services manager, Linda Bowling, is the NSAA Safety Champion for the 2015-16 season. The award recognizes a resort employee showing exceptional dedication and enthusiasm toward educating and promoting safety to guests and employees.

For Bowling—a mother of three and a grandmother of four—safety is serious business. Having worked in the guest services department for six years, Bowling says she remains as passionate about Sun Valley, its community, and guest safety as she did her first day on the job.

This tireless safety advocate and her staff of 40 strive to connect with guests at four different points during the day (at arrival, on the slopes, in the lodge, and upon departure), using each interaction as an opportunity to talk about safety and enhance their visit.

Bowling visits numerous schools to discuss the resort’s safety emphasis, and during 2015-16 she focused specifically on safe mountain use and the Mountain Community, a concept Sun Valley introduced in 2014-15 to emphasize courtesy, consideration, and respect.

Last season she helped spread the word through local media outlets including a radio station interview at KDPI that ignited a community-wide conversation about the importance of mountain safety. She is diligent about the safety emphasis with fellow employees too, spearheading an effort to use sunscreen and make the work environment cleaner, thus resulting in a safer and healthier workspace, according to Sun Valley Ski Patrol Supervisor Bryant Dunn, who nominated Bowling for the award.

“I’ve tried to incorporate fun into our approach to safety so that all of our mountain operations teams as well as our guests will embrace these concepts,” Bowling said. “Safety is a serious topic. The trick to making it resonate is making it fun.”

Safety is the underlying issue that affects every single experience a guest has on the mountain, Bowling added. “When you look at the world through your guests’ eyes it is easy to see that when they feel safe and secure they feel confident, strong, and their skiing reflects that confidence. Suddenly everyone has a great day on the mountain.”