

Story by Mark Aiken
Photography courtesy Brian Godfrey

Reading, Writing, and ... Skiing and Riding with Mr. G

Richmond Gym Teacher
Brings Snow Sports to All

Brian Godfrey does not sweat the details. Seven years ago, when he took a new job as physical education teacher at Richmond Elementary School, Brian met with parents to discuss potential opportunities in the Richmond community—untapped resources that could benefit the student experience. “Some parents mentioned skiing,” he says.

There were no budget dollars for alpine skiing in the physical education curriculum. Neither was there a precedent for such a unit, because, frankly, when is there time in a school day for skiing? Not one to let details like “time,” “money,” or “history” stand in his way, Brian pressed forward. He arranged transportation through the school district, scoured sales and seconds for equipment, and reached out to Barbara Ann Cochran, Richmond’s resident Olympic gold medalist skier. He calculated costs and raised funds by holding evening activity nights at school— “Mr. G’s Gymboree,” he called them.

He put so much time and energy making the dream a reality, that it wasn’t until later that Brian encountered a detail that even he considered more significant.

The very first group of fourth graders—his pilot group—filed off the school bus at Cochran’s Ski Area in Richmond. He geared them up with ski equipment that he had scrounged, sorted, tuned, and labeled himself. On the snow, he faced the group with former Olympian Barbara Ann at his side. At that moment something occurred to him: “I need to learn how to ski!”





Richmond Elementary School students enjoy a day on the slopes



Seven years later, Brian continues to vigorously raise funds and to organize a program that has expanded to 650 students from pre-kindergartners to fourth-graders from schools in Richmond, Jericho, Underhill, Bolton, and Huntington. In other words, his program serves every school in the Mount Mansfield Unified Union school district. The program takes place during school hours, and all transportation, equipment, instruction, and lift access is free of charge. Oh—and these days, Brian has not only learned to ski, he snowboards, too.

He calls the program Snow Motion.

The Path that Led Back Home

Brian—known to his legions of students and parents as “Mr. G.”—is respected and revered at his school. Maybe it’s his soft-spoken manner or his respectful attitude toward everyone with whom he interacts. “He is a role model for all of us,” says parent Tam Smith, whose children attended Richmond Elementary and participated in Snow Motion.

Brian was not a stranger to Richmond when he took the teaching job; he actually grew up in Richmond where his mom, Velma Plouffe, was town clerk. “It was never in my master plan to return,” he says. “It just sort of happened.” Also, to be clear: that first day of Snow Motion was not his very first time on snow; his mom brought him to Cochran’s twice as a kid. “I remember riding the T-bar,” he says. “And being scared.”

Brian credits his mom as having given him every opportunity he needed in order to be successful. Now, his mission is to make sure students in his hometown and surrounding communities have the same opportunities. Skiing and bicycling are units in his core curriculum (yes, he teaches kindergartners to ride two-wheelers). He has afterschool clubs for swimming, running, biking, and skiing. “Earlier in my career I was probably more into team sports,” he says. “Now I’m into lifetime fitness.”

Richmond Elementary was not the first stop on Brian’s career path; after graduating with a degree in education from Johnson State College (now known as Northern Vermont University – Johnson), he taught

in the Lincoln, Montpelier, and Stowe school districts. Along the way, he earned a master’s degree in educational leadership from the University of Vermont.

By the time he returned to Richmond, he came with experience and a belief that every place has unique strengths and resources. So, what were Richmond’s strengths? What features make this place unique?

He knew that Cochran’s Ski Area lay right outside of the Richmond village and he had a sense of the people who live in Richmond. From his years teaching at Stowe, he was also armed with the knowledge that Stowe has a “Friday program” in which schoolchildren set their books aside and instead ski, ride, or skate on Friday afternoons in the winter. (Ironically, Brian was relegated to “lodge duty” during his years at Stowe because he neither skied nor snowboarded.)

A vision took shape. Still, there were logistics; he knew a 45-minute time block for gym class was not enough to bus students across town, get geared up, and have anything resembling a meaningful outdoor experience. “I knew I needed buy-in from the teachers,” Brian says.

He therefore approached longtime fourth-grade teacher Maribeth Berliner—that is, his fourth-grade teacher—about taking two hours for alpine skiing in gym. “I knew she’d be up for anything,” Brian says. Her class became the first pilot group.

Maribeth isn’t the only teacher who supports Snow Motion. “Without support from our classroom teachers, the program wouldn’t exist,” says Brian. The teachers sacrifice classroom time, make sure students are properly dressed, and get them on the bus. And make no mistake: Richmond’s classroom teachers don’t get a two-hour break; rather, they are on the snow supporting Brian, Barbara Ann, and parent volunteers. “The teachers are 100 percent in,” says Brian.

You may ask: is taking two hours off from a school day prudent? Shouldn’t kids be studying and learning reading, writing, and arithmetic?



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Tam Smith sees Snow Motion as complementary. "Learning happens everywhere, and all learning informs other learning," she says. "This is an opportunity to stretch students' courage and curiosity and to see what they are capable of physically." The learning and growth that happen on the hill translates into learning that occurs in the classroom. "I think Mr. G. intuitively gets this," Tam says.

A Unique Resource

There are plenty of Vermont ski towns with world-class resorts whose names are almost synonymous with winter sports. These towns' local economies center around tourism. Richmond is neither a ski capital, nor a tourist destination. "Richmond doesn't have a lot of infrastructure," explains Amanda Repp, another Richmond parent whose children ski at school.

"Rather, we have people who get out there and make things happen."

People like Brian Godfrey. And the small army of parent volunteers who take time off from work to support Snow Motion at Cochran's.

And Cochran's Ski Area itself, the down-home, nonprofit, family-run, backyard ski hill. A far cry from the high-speed quads and state-of-the-art, post-and-beam base lodges and hotels of nearby Stowe and other world-class Vermont resorts, Cochran's boasts 350 vertical feet served by a rickety rope tow, T-bar, and Mighty-Mite lifts. The base lodge is, well, "rustic" (a few tables and benches and a kitchen where local high school-age employees or members of the Cochran family serve hot cocoa, soup, and grilled cheese sandwiches on cold nights and weekends).

In other words, it's a local treasure. It is inexpensive and a great place to learn. The founders of Cochran's, Mickey and Ginny

Cochran, bought a Richmond farmhouse between the Winooski River and a hillside in the fall of 1960. A national ski coach, Mickey wanted his four children to be able to practice skiing more than just on weekends. That winter, he fashioned a homemade rope tow using a tractor motor in the backyard and hung lights on the house.

"It was always public," says Barbara Ann Cochran, a former schoolteacher who still runs the ski school at Cochran's. "Dad charged people 25 cents to ski on Tuesday and Thursday nights."

Mickey's approach to training was correct and effective: all of the Cochran children ski-raced nationally and internationally. Barbara Ann reached the pinnacle of the sport: she won the gold medal in slalom at the 1972 Olympics in Sapporo, Japan. Several Cochran grandchildren grew up to race internationally or in college, and Barbara Ann's son Ryan Cochran-Siegel is currently still a member of the U.S. Ski

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Mr. G teaching a young skier

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Team—just one of thousands of children she taught to ski. Cochran's became a non-profit in 1999.

Barbara Ann's nephew, Jimmy Cochran, World Cup skier and Olympian in 2006 and 2010, serves as general manager. "There has always been tremendous community support," says Barbara Ann. She notes that Snow Motion isn't the first school program to come to Cochran's; local high school ski teams have long used Cochran's as a base for training. And Richmond and Williston schools have brought students after school for years. "The Richmond PTA called Mom in 1962 to ask if she would do an after-school program," Barbara Ann says of her mom, Ginny. The problem was that only one Richmond parent knew how to ski. Ginny not only had to train the other moms how to ski, but also had to train them how to teach others to ski.

Brian Godfrey, however, was the first to suggest a school program during the day. Another minor detail was that Cochran's doesn't operate during non-vacation midweek days. But because of Brian's commitment, Cochran's decided to open for Richmond schoolchildren. "It's an incredible gift that we have Cochran's right here," Tam says. "It's like a symbol for the best of Vermont: we're a small, but scrappy, community. We have this little, but stellar, ski area. Brian saw these incredible hidden treasures, and he found a way to use them in a way where the entire community wins."

Snow Motion has instructors with Olympic and World Cup experience. How many gym classes can claim that honor?

An Experience Gap

"I played basketball growing up," says Brian, whose hoops career extended into college. After graduating, he continued coaching, and he organized teams, Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) leagues, and tournaments—a warmup perhaps for the organization he does today in support of Snow Motion.

About half the children in Snow Motion have never skied or snowboarded before. The socio-economic range in Richmond—like most places in Vermont—spans the spectrum. "You've heard of a learning gap,"

Brian says. "Well, there's also an experience gap." While one student will come to class Monday talking about skiing at Stowe, another will say, "What's Stowe?"

Regardless of a student's socio-economic status, Brian believes that students should have access. "You may not see the impact for years," he says. There are Richmond parents who wouldn't think to expose their own children to skiing or riding at Cochran's because it's cost-prohibitive—or maybe simply because their parents never exposed them as kids. For today's Richmond Elementary students, snow sports are demystified. "Maybe they'll take their kids to a ski hill in 20 years," Brian muses.

"I hadn't snowboarded much before," says sixth-grader Tavia Smith-Miodownik, who participated in Snow Motion. Tavia recalls trudging uphill with a snowboard strapped to one foot. "It took persistence," she says. Eventually, however, she and her friends built the skills to ride the lift and venture off independently.

Suddenly they were making decisions for themselves regarding their own safety. "We helped each other," she says. "There were some trails that my friends wanted to take, but I knew I just wasn't ready." She wisely rode down easier routes and stayed safe. "I still had fun though," she says. "And sometimes we'd still stick together."

Why do parents, teachers, and administrators support Snow Motion? For the independence, decision-making, confidence building, and learned cooperation that Tavia describes.

Unfortunately, the program is not currently self-sustaining. "I want Snow Motion to outlast me," says Brian. The buses, lifts, and equipment cost money. Brian holds events such as a Big Truck day, parties, concerts, and summer camps to subsidize something that every Richmond student looks forward to. He organizes volunteers and solicits support from companies such as Burton or Killington, who have donated, or sold at a discount, skis, boards, and helmets. He shares Snow Motion equipment with other districts and schools. He raised funds for trailers to transport (and store) gear.

Meanwhile, take note: not everyone can

afford Brian's fundraising summer camps, which take children mountain biking at Kingdom Trails, rock climbing both indoors and out, and swimming at Jay Peak's Pumphouse water park. But Brian will not turn a student away for a financial shortfall. He is therefore raising funds to support scholarships for his fundraisers. "We work with every kid," he says. Meanwhile, he brings middle-schoolers as volunteer counselors-in-training, and he employs high schoolers as counselors. "He showed me the meaning of being respectful," says Luc Smith-Miodownik, a freshman at Colorado College who served as one of Brian's camp counselors.

At an elementary school in a small Vermont town, students, teachers, and parents are witnessing something special. Here, activities often restricted for the privileged are accessible to all. A community and its schools support and embrace outdoor experiences, even though it means removing students from the classroom. In the middle of it all is Brian Godfrey, the soft-spoken, uber-respectful role model for all of Richmond, the founder and driver of Snow Motion. The lives of Richmond schoolchildren—and the town itself—will never be the same.

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