

A Festival for Black Skiers in Idaho Became a Coronavirus Nightmare

More than 100 skiers who traveled to celebrate together would ultimately fall ill, likely carrying the virus to their homes around the country

By Dan Frosch and Ian Lovett
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On a Sunday afternoon in the resort community of Ketchum, Idaho, more than 600 African American skiers paraded into the town square, dancing to Tom Browne's "Funkin' For Jamaica." A DJ shouted the names of dozens of black ski clubs, each sporting matching parkas to signify the different cities from which they hailed.

But as the annual gathering of the National Brotherhood of Skiers kicked off on March 1, few realized that 650 miles away, the country's first reported death from the new coronavirus had just occurred near Seattle. By the end of the week, the virus would silently hit Ketchum and accompany the skiers back home.

Several days after the summit ended on March 7, Stephanie Harris anxiously drove her husband to a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., emergency room with a worsening cough and fever. That same week, Ben Finley, one of the group's founders, was taken to a University of California, Los Angeles, hospital, struggling to breathe. Soon after, Sandy Henderson, president of Black Ski Inc. in Washington, D.C., collapsed on her bathroom floor.

This year's weeklong gathering of the National Brotherhood of Skiers was supposed to be a celebratory landmark in the group's 47-year existence: The organization's two founders were going to become the first African-Americans ever inducted into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame later that month.

Instead, more than 100 attendees developed symptoms of Covid-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus. Numerous members have tested positive, some have been hospitalized in intensive care, and at least two have died.

"I was not thinking this could happen to me, especially because we were going to Idaho," said Brian Grimes, who became sick after returning to Chicago from the summit. More than half the members of his Sno-Gophers Ski Club who attended also developed symptoms of coronavirus.

Though attendees had no way of knowing it, the NBS summit happened at the worst possible time, when the virus was whipping around the country but hadn't yet been detected in most places. Had it been held a week earlier; they might have escaped infection. A week later, the summit might have been canceled.

With tourists shuttling in and out from around the world every day, ski towns throughout the Rockies became deadly way stations for coronavirus last month. Blaine County, Idaho, which includes Ketchum, had the country's highest rate of coronavirus infection as of Friday, with more than 400 cases in a county of just 23,000.

During this year's NBS summit, conventions of wilderness doctors and trauma doctors—as well as skiers from Seattle and California, early hot spots of coronavirus—converged on Ketchum and neighboring Sun Valley.

"You have this perfect synergy for the problem we are now seeing," said Terry O'Connor, Blaine County's emergency medical services director.

Some in the black ski group have worried they would be blamed for spreading coronavirus in Blaine

County. A local newspaper detailed how residents had interacted with summit attendees before coming down with Covid-19, which members felt unfairly singled them out.

Last week, the organization posted an open letter on Facebook, signed by its president and the mayors of Ketchum and neighboring Sun Valley, saying any accusations that they had brought the virus to Idaho were baseless.

"I don't know how we got it. I know we didn't bring it," Henri Rivers, the president of NBS, said. NBS co-founders Art Clay, left, and Ben Finley at the Idaho summit in March. Mr. Finley later tested positive for coronavirus.

NBS summits have been landmark events for black skiers since 1973, when the first one was held in Aspen, Colo. Mr. Finley, an aerospace engineer who helped organize that first summit, said the National Guard was put on alert before the group's arrival, anticipating trouble.

Within a few years, resorts were competing for NBS's business, though skiers still occasionally got quizzical looks on the mountain. Conference registration fees go toward helping young black skiers and snowboarders develop, with the goal of getting one onto the U.S. Olympic team.

After arriving for this year's summit, members took photos and exchanged stories about children and grandchildren at a welcome party on Feb. 29. Gary Garrett, a 6'5" retired fire captain from Stockton, Calif., had been waiting for the summit all year.

"This group was as important to him as being a firefighter," his wife, Elena King-Garrett, said. "They are like brothers and sisters."

After the parade on Sunday, NBS members crowded into a local bar, Whiskey Jacques', where a DJ played old school funk and the latest line dance hits. It would be nearly two weeks before public-health officials began pushing social distancing across the country.

"It was packed," said Miles Maxey, a 65-year-old retired technical expert for General Motors who had come from Detroit with about 60 others from the Jim Dandy Ski Club.

"Townsppeople were coming and hugging us, saying 'thanks for coming.'"

Ski and snowboard races began Tuesday. Wednesday, the group picnicked on the mountain. Thursday was game night. Friday, a trophy was presented to the Jim Dandys, who won the most races. DJ Jazzy Jeff, the hip-hop artist who worked with Will Smith, played a set that night at Whiskey Jacques'.

Near the end of the week, Ms. Harris's husband, Mark Toliver, a retired FedEx IT worker, felt unusually tired, at one point returning to his room for a three-hour nap. Others recalled their bodies aching more than usual. But they chalked it up to the skiing, the partying and the altitude.

"We were talking about it when we were out there," Ms. Harris said of the virus. "But we were talking about it as if it was not there."

When Mr. Grimes got home to Chicago on March 7, he collapsed into bed, where he spent the next three days with chills and body aches, his sense of smell gone. Then texts began coming in from club members. Others were sick, too.

In Florida, Mr. Toliver was feverish on March 9, and had drenched his sheets with sweat. His wife, Ms. Harris, spent the next three days struggling to get him tested for coronavirus. "Somebody has to help me. I will call 911, I don't care. But somebody needs to help me," she said she told an emergency room receptionist at Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale before driving her husband there. Mr. Toliver was

ultimately placed in isolation and diagnosed with pneumonia in his left lung; he tested positive for the virus.

Ms. Harris emailed their ski club's president, Ms. Henderson, on March 18, telling her Mr. Toliver had Covid-19. Ms. Henderson wished them a speedy recovery.

But Ms. Henderson and her partner hadn't been feeling well themselves. The next day while brushing her teeth, Ms. Henderson fainted. The morning of March 20, barely able to walk, she drove them both 20 minutes to a hospital in Greenbelt, Md. The couple tested positive for Covid-19 and were placed in separate critical-care rooms.

Members of the Jim Dandy Ski Club at the event's opening ceremony.

"It was like somebody had taken a lemon and just squeezed every single ounce of liquid out," Ms. Henderson said of how she felt.

In Stockton, Mr. Garrett was hospitalized for 10 days, including two in the ICU.

In all, at least one in six people who attended the black ski summit came down with symptoms consistent with coronavirus, according to organizers.

Back in Blaine County, Idaho, meanwhile, local officials were dealing with their own outbreak at the same time NBS attendees were getting sick.

On March 12, St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center in Ketchum had its first patient test positive for coronavirus, according to Dr. O'Connor, the county emergency medical services director, who works at the hospital.

Over the next few weeks, the emergency room saw dozens of coronavirus cases. Nearly 25 percent of the hospital staff have spent time in quarantine, and two emergency room doctors have tested positive. Two county residents have died from Covid-19.

Sun Valley ski resort closed March 15. Hotels are closed, except those offering rooms to healthcare workers. The roads in Ketchum are "deathly quiet," said Mayor Neil Bradshaw, who gave a speech welcoming NBS to town just a few weeks ago.

Many of the NBS skiers now are in the process of recovering—both physically and from the shock that their week of celebration had turned tragic.

Mr. Finley, the 81-year-old NBS co-founder, was released from the UCLA medical center, after testing positive for coronavirus and spending three days in the ICU. His hall of fame induction ceremony, previously set for late March, has been delayed to December.

Mr. Toliver got better after about two weeks of illness, his wife said.

DJ Jazzy Jeff posted on Instagram on Monday that he was recovering from pneumonia in both lungs and had lost his senses of smell and taste, a hallmark of coronavirus.

Ms. Henderson, who has since recovered with her partner, said hearing about so many fellow black skiers from NBS falling ill felt as if the virus had struck her family. Walking around Washington, D.C., other black people often react with surprise when she tells them she skis. But on the mountain, at the summit, she is home.

"If someone had told me one of those days I was out there that I would come back to this, I would never have believed it," she said.

On Monday, a skier who attended the summit, from the Blade Runners Ski Club in the Los Angeles area, died from the virus, his club announced. Two days later, the son of another skier who was stricken with Covid-19 posted an update on Facebook. His father had died.

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