

A woman wearing a blue ski jacket, black gloves, and a helmet with goggles is pushing a child in a specialized ski sled down a snowy slope. The child is wearing a dark blue ski jacket, a black helmet, and is seated in the sled. The sled has a metal frame and two skis at the bottom. The background shows a snowy mountain slope with some trees in the distance.

ON THE JOB

By Caroline Eubanks

The Black Hills area of South Dakota gets more than three million visitors annually who come for its wide open spaces and National Parks. But until recently, not all travelers could participate in the winter sports for which the region is so well known. Suzanne Luken, a ski instructor at Terry Peak Ski Area in the town of Lead, has been instrumental in changing this and making the sport open to all.

"I grew up outside of Deadwood, South Dakota, in the country so I was always outside playing, and have always loved the Black Hills because there's so much to do here," she says. "I started skiing at a very young age, but have done a lot of outdoor things. I didn't ski for a while and then several years ago I started again and decided I wanted to be an instructor." She got a job at the ski area, which has been used by outdoors lovers since the 1930s.

"One of the instructors in our ski school worked a lot with adaptive kids and individuals and asked me to help him with the Special Olympics and the skiing program that they have," Luken recalls.

"I just kind of found that that was something I really enjoyed. A couple of smiles, that's all you need to keep you motivated to keep going, and make more of those smiles. I really enjoyed that aspect of it."

When her colleague retired, the ski school turned to her. She took inventory of the equipment needed to continue to operate an adaptive program and the options were few.



"The ski school director at the time encouraged me to start a nonprofit, so that the nonprofit could help provide equipment to the ski school and the adaptive program," she says. "Then we could see if we could build that program up." What came next was the founding of ABLE Sports in 2022, which stands for adapt, believe, learn, and experience, and is now in its second ski season.

A phone call from a family in Gillette, Wyoming, around an hour and a half away, helped to cement the importance of her organization's mission in the early days. Luken says, "[This man] was an amputee and had done some skiing in Idaho, but obviously we were closer. His mom called our program and said, 'I really want to get him back on skis. Can you help?'"

At the time, there was only one pair of outriggers, the types of skis typically used by para-skiers for balance, and little else. Since then, ABLE has acquired several additional pairs of outriggers plus a SnowKart, an adaptive option that allows users to control it with only one hand. Luken has since visited other adaptive programs and conferences across the country, learning about new technology in the field and bringing it to South Dakota.





"I've done two years of training at Mount Hood," she says. "There are people from adaptive programs all across the U.S. and I met a group from Iceland and some from British Columbia, Canada. There are so many adaptive programs that are thriving. They're huge in places like Colorado, Seattle, Whitefish, Montana, Santa Fe and New Mexico."

Progress has been challenging for Luken. "I think that South Dakota is lacking or lagging behind in adaptive everything," she says. "Iowa has an adaptive golf cart and I would love to have South Dakota say we have one, too." The work of the nonprofit organization is made possible with donations, both financial and of equipment. "It's just one of those things where you have to keep the equipment up, you need to obtain more equipment, insurance is expensive. I mean, just to run the website is a cost. There's so much that we have to do," she says.

The University of Utah teaches the participants to use their TetraSki and TetraSail by software, like a [virtual reality] video game. Luken is working on acquiring one of those and looking for a storage solution for the growing collection of adaptive sleds as the organization continues to grow. While there are other adaptive ski programs in the west, many operate in a limited capacity. Another goal Luken hopes ABLE can achieve is to expand the scope of services at Terry Peak, perhaps with year-round sports during the off-season, like adaptive kayaking.

Meanwhile, Luken continues her work as a ski instructor at Terry Peak, in addition to running ABLE Sports. But when she's not on the slopes and helping those with different needs learn to ski, you'll usually find her exploring the Black Hills or golfing. "That is my thing," she laughs. "My son and I actually got third place in a golf tournament yesterday."