

Essay

Greeting Flyin' Ryan Crew! I am applying for this grant to secure funding for my partner, Betsey Peryea (who is also a Flyin' Ryan Adventure Scholar and grant recipient) and I to attempt the first adaptive athlete ski traverse of the Wind River mountains in Wyoming. We attempted a similar traverse (shorter version, due to high snow affecting our intended access route) last year, camped 12 days and covered about 40 miles. Unfortunately, we needed to turn around on day 9 due to above freezing temperatures overnight even at 10k, which created dangerous travel conditions. The main motivation to accomplish this traverse is to show the outdoor community that the biggest hurdles for adaptive athletes are financial and societal, and when the community comes together to help remove these barriers, adaptive athletes are capable of accomplishing extremely challenging goals. We also want to spread awareness about long covid, which has been Betsey's (and I's) greatest challenge yet. The more publicity we can draw to Betsey through her accomplishments, the more we will be able to spread awareness and inspire others who identify with Betsey's story and struggles.. This expedition is also important to me because it will be the culmination of all of the outdoor/mountain skills that I have been accumulating, practicing and training for over the last 12 years, and I would also be the first splitboarder to traverse the Wind Rivers (from what I can tell).

Unfortunately, our financial situation is even more strained than last year. I have been supporting Betsey financially for the last several years, since the pandemic and the subsequent long covid issues we have been dealing with have prevented her from working. Betsey and I train strength and endurance 5 days a week, and she has a coach who schedule's her training load based on the level of fatigue that he monitors. While I don't have a coach, I maintain a similar schedule to Betsey but have been using the book "Training for the Uphill Athlete" and other resources for mountain athletes to tweak my programming. I fully believe in our ability to complete this traverse, and I want to amplify her story to give hope to those suffering from the same issues as her. However, the only barrier to another attempt is the financial one. Delays in Betsey's medical care as well as extensive medical testing over the last few months have drained our time and finances. Without receiving funds to purchase food, fuel, gas money and replace some of Betsey's worn out gear, it's unlikely that we'd be able to try again.

I realize, however, that the purpose of this essay is to tell you more about myself, so I want to answer the question: How does a dorky, unathletic kid from the suburbs of New Jersey become a mountain athlete capable of planning and executing the first adaptive athlete ski traverse of the formidable Wind River mountain range? Despite many years in the boy scouts, I only went camping twice during my childhood and I didn't even own any gear. My first overnight camping trip while attending St. Michael's college involved me carrying my supplies in a trash bag slung over my shoulder and absolutely exhausting myself traveling a few easy miles to a lean-to. I had come to college to study psychology and music, but I ended up getting a crash course in outdoor skills. Somehow that experience didn't sour my taste for the outdoors, and I continued to venture out in a similar fashion, naively throwing myself into adventures and frequently suffering, more often than not with a smile on my face. My family and friends back home often have a hard time understanding why I pursue adventures in the mountains that can sometimes lead to uncomfortable, or from their perspective, needlessly dangerous experiences. Ironically I believe that those experiences saved me; without them I'd likely have been pulled down the path of substance abuse and depression that so often taints the lives of many other neurodivergent folks. The combination of ADHD, plus lack of coordination and confidence meant that I wasn't particularly successful at school or sports, and I struggled with my self esteem. As I look back, I realize that many of my issues stem from my parents not supporting my interests. For example, they allowed me to get a skateboard and ride it in our driveway, but they would not take me to the skate park for fear that I'd end up hanging with the "bad kids". Ironically,

I would eventually fall in with the exact crowd they were afraid of, leading to quite a few years of bad decisions. While I didn't fully identify with the downtrodden view of the world that my "friends" had, they were the only people who could relate to my struggle existing in a culture that gave very little room for self discovery and limited options for what a person could do with their life. My environment left a void in me that couldn't be filled with the instant gratification I was using to plug it up, and I hadn't yet been exposed to more adaptive forms of self healing. I often wonder if they had taken me to the skatepark even once a month, if I would have been exposed to better role models; though skateboarding can get a bad rep, in general it can be a safe haven for young kids who don't fit in.

While some of the relationships early on in my life would open the door to mal-adaptive behavior, the ones I made later on would set me on the path to self actualization and growth. The folks that included me on adventures despite my sub-parr fitness and skills were the catalyst for my development into a confident mountain athlete. In college, my best friend Sean introduced me to the reward of hiking the back bowls of Smuggs in search of fresh snow, and talked me into riding the headwall at Tuckerman's Ravine. After graduating, Sean and I moved out to Montana where I accompanied him on many missions that were well above my paygrade. In the winter, I pursued snowboard coaching certifications in my career as an instructor at Big Sky, and sharpened my teeth hiking the extreme terrain of the headwaters chutes with Sean as many times as possible each day. In the summer, we strapped our shred-tools to our backs and hiked miles to climb and ride the distance peaks that were inaccessible during the snowy months. The memories of my first summer in Montana are colored with overwhelming fear as I tested myself climbing snow with ice axes and crampons, got caught in a thunderstorm at 12k, and cartwheeled down the face of a mountain. But there are also countless memories of me overcoming that fear and experiencing pure elation with my closest friends as we tested ourselves against an unfamiliar landscape. Sean's ski racing background combined with his love of skateboarding allowed him to turn lines that I was making little jump turns down, into a giant slalom or freestyle course depending on the day. The gap in our abilities as well as his eye-catching style inspired me to dedicate myself to honing my skills. Some days I would train my fundamental skills in the pursuit of high coaching certifications, and others would be spent lapping the steepest runs with the worst snow, in an effort to improve my fluidity and speed in all conditions and terrain. While Sean served as my model for what my freeriding could become, my supervisor Mary served as my trainer and examiner for coaching certifications. Never pulling her punches in the best of ways, Mary delivered feedback with a calm fierceness that addressed my inconsistencies with straightforward and actionable steps. She had the ability to distill information into digestible mantras that could be deployed in the moment to facilitate a desired movement, which in turn influenced my communication style as well as my riding. Being able to deliver necessary feedback in a direct but approachable way is a cornerstone of any partnership in the mountains. After a few years in Montana, I befriended a mountain guide from Alaska named Brad who facilitated my employment with a glacier and wilderness outfitter in Juneau. My freeriding skills complemented his training in the mountains, and he became my unofficial climbing mentor. Though we never accomplished any significant objectives together, the knowledge I gained from Brad helped me obtain some of the missing puzzle pieces in my development as a snowboard mountaineer. Under his guidance I went from never roping up, to a fairly confident 5.7 trad climber with knowledge of rope systems and best rescue practices. It was the addition of those skills that has allowed me to look at projects like the Wind River ski traverse that Betsey dreamt up as an accomplishable goal.

The last thing I want to express is that I deeply care about the outdoor community, and I am committed to being a role model as well as educating others with the knowledge I have gained over the years. Not only do I want to spread awareness about the challenges facing adaptive athletes, but I want to show the world how much of a positive impact that the outdoors can have for anyone who is struggling. If Betsey

and I are able to give this trip another shot, we will have the potential to amplify our voices, mentor others and spread awareness about the core values that gave us the foundation to accomplish our goals. Thanks so much for taking the time to read (what feels like has become) my short novel.