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The ABR's Elite Grooming Team! On your marks, get set . . . Perfect!
PHOTO BY RANDY AHNEN.

Anderson Bluffs and River Trails Foundation

Now and for Generations to Come

Will Andresen

Most readers have heard and been deeply inspired by **Eric Anderson** and **Angela Santini's** gift of ABR to a non-profit foundation. But few know what the **Anderson Bluffs and River Trails Foundation (or ABR Trails Foundation/Foundation)** has been doing or its plans for the future. On behalf of the Foundation board, I'd like to share our side of this story. Spoiler alert: *We are doing our best to change as little as possible.*

In 2025, the ABR Trails Foundation became the proud new owners of the entirety of ABR, its trails, land, buildings, and grooming equipment; and, most importantly, its brand. Created in 2019, the Foundation's nine-member board of directors is comprised of a strong and diverse group of skiers passionate about sustaining not just the infrastructure, but also the brand that Eric and Angela have lovingly created and gifted to all of us.

With a great gift comes great responsibility. The ABR Trails Foundation Board takes this responsibility very seriously.

Beginnings

In its earliest days, the board worked hard to just understand the complexity of the system that Eric and Angela created piece-by-piece for over 30 years; working to understand the trail network, land ownership, grooming, ski shop, cabins, and much more. Then we learned how to seamlessly transition a for-profit corporation into a non-profit foundation. And then we worked to create the organizational structure and employee model to ensure the Foundation's success.

Perhaps most importantly in those early days, we sought to understand the key ingredients of ABR's secret sauce and to agree that we will not mess with those critical components that we all love.

In response, the ABR Trails Foundation identified its core values to be: Relationships, service, participant experience, and excellence; and crafted its mission to be: "To sustain the ABR legacy as the Midwest's premier Nordic ski destination for generations



The ABR Trails Foundation on Location. Standing, left to right: Will Andresen, Greg Greene, Eric Anderson, Clay Diggins, Randy Ahnen, Missi King, and Kristi Reitz. Kneeling, left to right: Sue Schroeder and Emily Fitting.

PHOTO BY: ALYSSA SCHWAB.

to come and connect ABR Trails to the larger community." The first part of this mission statement, sustaining the ABR legacy, has been our primary thrust. We remain committed to retaining what we all know and love about ABR for many, many years into the future. We hope that when skiers pull up to the ABR parking lot, walk into the chalet, and ski on its trails, that they will see and feel little to no difference.

Honoring Place & People

The Foundation Board believes that ABR's greatest assets are its scenic trails, excellent grooming, and friendly people. We are focusing our efforts on retaining the ABR look and feel. To the relief of many, *Eric will continue as our Chief Groomer*, leading our existing team of outstanding groomers with their extensive set of grooming equipment. There will be new, friendly faces in the ski



Foundation volunteers preparing firewood to keep skiers warm. Thank you!

PHOTO BY RANDY AHNEN.

shop on most days, but don't be surprised if you see Angela volunteering behind the counter on a busy weekend.

We already know that there will be some system efficiencies put in place, but for the most part, we anticipate that the skier experience will remain unchanged.

That's not entirely true; we hope that the skiing experience will improve in some ways. For example, we are currently pursuing what we are calling a "golf course loop" to accommodate future low-snow events. Even in Big Snow Country, some low-snow periods can be expected. Especially for early-season skiing, ensuring that we can offer excellent skiing to high school and college teams as well as eager master-blasters will be crucial. As one cog in the great machinery of Midwest skiing, we believe it is our job to help ensure that all skiers will continue to enjoy skiing on natural snow.

Speaking of ski trail enjoyment, **Jessie Diggins** is thrilled to support the transition of ABR into a Foundation that preserves the trails where she learned to love the sport. On December 14, 2024, the Foundation hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony to officially name a trail in her honor. Jessie has many wonderful memories that were made while skiing at ABR with friends and family. The **Jessie Diggins Honorary Tamarack Two Track Trail** that winds through the scenic bluffs and forests of the ABR property. Also in recognition of Jessie's support, the Foundation has placed **Honor Your Trail** signs along the Tamarack Two-Track.

While it's too early to know or share in the Foundation's young life, we are also looking at other facility and programming enhancements. For example: new events and off-season offerings. One early project already starting to play out is our **Happy Trails initiative**, an effort to strengthen and promote awareness around the many physical and mental health benefits of cross-country skiing through the woods. Look for upcoming events and updates on our website.

Welcoming Ways

The second part of our mission statement, connecting ABR to the larger community, is just as important. Sustaining ABR for generations to come will be impossible without these crucial community connections.

The workings of the Foundation Board tell just a small part of this story. The real story and the real work come from our numerous, strong connections with committed employees and motivated volunteers, action committees and advisory groups, community partners and foundation donors, and, most importantly, our skiers.

Nestled deep in the forests of Big Snow Country, ABR Trails is a proud community partner with a number of popular neighboring ski trails, including Wolverine, Miners, the Iron Belle Trail, Montreal, Uller, and MECCA trail systems. We are working to establish physical trail connections between these systems wherever possible, with early movement already playing out in several cases in our **Project Connect** efforts. For example, in partnership with the **Gogebic Range Health Foundation**, we have extended trails to the Erwin Township Historical Society's nearby park and trail system. We have also acquired property



Dedication of the Foundation's Jessie Diggins Honorary Tamarack Two Track Trail, with Jessie's parents, Deb and Clay.

PHOTO BY KRISTI REITZ.



Connecting ABR to the Larger Community.

IMAGE CREDIT: EMILY FITTING.

between ABR and the City of Ironwood to extend year-round trail access along the popular **SISU Ski Fest** racecourse.

A variety of partners and volunteers are already on board helping us out. We have hosted several successful volunteer work-bees, from bridge building and trail maintenance to splitting and stacking firewood for our warming huts, cabins, and chalet. We have committed experts in their fields serving on our technical and advisory committees, including national ski industry leaders sitting on our aspirational advisory panel.

Donors have been very generous, sharing their gifts, especially in our recent **Founder's Circle Campaign**. Skiers have been positive and supportive of our efforts, telling us daily how important it is to know that ABR will be there for generations to come.

Bottom Line: The ABR Trails Foundation Board envisions and aspires to change little in what skiers will see, while the greatest change is what we hope skiers will feel. Our greatest hope is that skiers and community partners will feel great ownership in the ABR ski trails and their future. ☺



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