



THE MAGIC OF SKIING WHILE GRIEVING

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When the author made the gutsy decision to incorporate skiing into her grieving journey, she slowly began to live in the moment and find joy in what had been a family passion. Read on about her journey..

I was introduced to skiing in 1972 when I attended a four-week camp for high school students in Zermatt, Switzerland. During that memorable summer, I spent the first half in the Swiss Alps and the other half at Camp Nicolet in Eagle River, Wisconsin. I never imagined this intense sport would become a focal point for my future family vacations and an elixir for bereavement.

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Adam, Josh, Aaron, and Jordan Bornstein at Keystone Resort, Winter 2001

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A Family Love of Skiing



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A few years later, I married Ira, a law student who loved to ski. We raised our four sons in suburban Chicago and spent most of our winter and spring vacations at Colorado's Keystone Resort. In the winter and spring, my children mastered their skiing, and during the summers, we hiked, mountain biked, went horseback riding, and

enjoyed what the mountains had to offer. In 2000, we relocated to Colorado.

After the premature passing of my beloved husband, Ira, in July 2023, I struggled to accomplish simple things. Fatigue and brain fog were daily occurrences. I had little interest in being near large groups of people or doing things that I used to enjoy. While my brain was slowly adjusting to the reality of my loss, I felt like I was stuck in a pool of quicksand. To move forward, I had to regain a sense of balance.

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Sandy and Ira Bornstein at Copper Mountain, February 14, 2022. Photo by Olivia Butrymovich

The Terminal Diagnosis

When I drove to Summit County, Colorado, in early December 2023, I had mixed feelings about the 2023/2024 ski season without Ira. Just a year ago, Ira and I skied for the last time together. He was energetic and happy. We were both grateful to be starting the third ski season after Ira's July 2020 [glioblastoma](#) diagnosis. For two and half years, Ira was fortunate to maintain an active lifestyle (skiing, snowshoeing, horseback riding, hiking, snorkeling, and worldwide traveling) despite his terminal diagnosis.

By the beginning of January 2023, a new inoperable tumor was detected. Suddenly, and with almost no warning, Ira was rapidly losing the ability to use his left extremities—foot, leg, arm, and hand. His Colorado and out-of-state medical teams could do nothing to stop the growth of the tumor in his thalamus. The remaining six and a half months of Ira's life were incredibly hard to endure as the ill effects of terminal brain cancer eroded his vitality.



Returning to Keystone

In the Keystone Resort parking lot, I spent a long time convincing myself that I could ski solo. Since it was the

beginning of the season and few people were skiing on a weekday, I rode the six-passenger chairlift by myself. When it came time to raise the safety bar, I questioned whether I could lift it without assistance. My brief panic attack was eliminated when I successfully got off the chairlift without any issues.

As I traversed familiar runs, I recalled many amazing family memories. Intermittent smiles replaced my somber appearance. Incredible images floated in and out of my consciousness. When I reached the next ski lift, I knew I had made the right decision to ski again. How could I not continue participating in an exhilarating sport connecting me with the majestic Rocky Mountains? On the next ride up the mountain, I ensured I was riding with others.

I took countless chairlift rides at Keystone Resort and Copper Mountain during the season. Each offered the wonderful opportunity to talk with a cross-section of people who share my passion for skiing and my love of the outdoors. While these brief encounters provide minimal social contact, they offset the long hours of being alone in my home. Sometimes, I shared my widowhood status, while other times, conversations covered a myriad of topics. The kindness exhibited by total strangers is heartwarming. On more than one occasion, women skiers embraced me and made comments encouraging me to keep looking forward.



Sandy Bornstein at Keystone Resort, February 2024. Photo by Aaron Bornstein

Skiing to Cope with Grief

Occasionally, I fought enormous waves of grief. To successfully cope, I created an easy-to-follow routine that allocated certain times for skiing. The freedom to select my route each day allowed me to enter a flow mindset where I became totally immersed in my invigorating outdoor experience. After completing [*The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss*](#) by Mary-Frances O'Connor, I can understand why skiing is helping to minimize my negative emotions. O'Connor states, "The 'undoing' of negative emotions with positive emotions works because positive emotions change cognitive and physiological states. Positive emotions broaden people's attention, encourage creative thinking, and expand people's coping toolkit." (page

Before Ira's death, I had researched longevity and how to beat terminal cancer. I learned that it is imperative to be physically active on a regular basis in outdoor locations. Simply being outdoors enlivens my spirit—something that is impossible to duplicate indoors. Studies focusing on skiing have pointed out that downhill skiers tend to live healthier lifestyles, leading to a better sense of psychological well-being. I may be just one individual, but I can totally agree with that statement.

My frequent visits to the mountains have made me feel incredible—both mentally and physically. Time on the slopes has strengthened my muscles and bones while improving my balance, coordination, flexibility, and reaction time to variable conditions. Over time, my body became better acclimated to the higher altitude and colder temperatures. I had no problem skiing runs without stopping, indicating that my cardiovascular system was improving.



Candice, Max, Sandy, Aaron, and Isabella Bornstein Tubing at Frisco's Adventure Park, March 2024

A Family Tradition Continues

Occasionally, my sons and their families drove to the mountains so we could enjoy winter sports together. I loved watching my grandchildren embrace a passion that has been part of my life for more than 50 years. I was able to ski with my five grandchildren who are old enough to ski, and go tubing with my grandchildren, Max and Isabella. Ira and I enriched our family's lifestyle with frequent visits to the mountains. Now our intense connections to skiing and Mother Nature are being passed to the next generation.

Meeting Other Skiers

I joined a Meet Up group called Summit 50+ Ski with Us to expand my connections with other skiers. On Thursdays, I followed a volunteer guide who led small groups of similarly skilled skiers down the slopes at Keystone Resort. This option allowed me to ski with locals and visitors and to be social during a leisurely lunch at Keystone's Timber Ridge restaurant.



Early Morning Over the Hill Gang Start at Copper Mountain, February 2024. Photo by Sandy Bornstein

I also took advantage of a media opportunity to participate a few times at [Copper Mountain's Over the Hill Gang \(OHG\) program](#). This fee-based resort program runs from January through March and includes 44 days of

skiing with professional guides assigned to numerous leveled ski groups. The ski instructors picked the best routes based on snow conditions and offered many valuable tips along the way. I had the flexibility to join OHG four times a week on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays from 9 AM to 3 PM. While the lift lines were minimal on weekdays, the groups had access to the quicker ski school line. In addition to skiing, members of these groups also gather socially. Perhaps I will feel more inclined to attend their Happy Hour events after my first year of grieving.

Both group activities added a special dimension to my ski experience. I was inspired by men and women who were considerably older than me and often had more than one orthopedic replacement. Instead of skiing a few dozen times a season, some of these hard-core skiers are on the slopes nearly 100 times a year. While I consider myself in good shape, many of these skiers can tackle more challenging terrain at faster speeds. By joining these groups, I no longer need to ski alone. I can spend either part of the day or the whole day with others. The lunchtime breaks gave additional time to chat. Contact information was often exchanged. New friendships were formed. At the end of the 2023-2024 ski season, I skied 30 times at Keystone Mountain and five times at Copper Mountain.



Skiing at Keystone Mountain. Photo by Sandy Bornstein

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- [Ski Resorts Worth Traveling To: Discover the Globe's Snow-Covered Gems](#)
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Carrying on the Skiing Tradition

Making the gutsy decision to incorporate skiing into my grieving journey opened the door to a plethora of joyful moments. I was able to give my brain periodic breaks from the emotional turmoil caused by Ira's passing

and begin to live in the moment. Time in the mountains helped minimize the random waves of grief and allowed me to begin the process of acceptance. By redirecting my attention to an activity that Ira and I both loved, I embraced my new reality—skiing solo. Downhill skiing in Summit County, Colorado, became a wintertime elixir for coping with my bereavement.

We invite you to explore *Wander With Wonder* for more of our [favorite ski adventures](#) and other things you can do when you [visit Colorado](#).



Written by Sandy Bornstein

Sandy Bornstein is a Colorado-based, award-winning travel and lifestyle writer who focuses on active adventure, food and beverages, history and culture, cruises, luxury boomer travel, family travel, health and wellness, worldwide Jewish culture, and the importance of embracing life when faced with an incurable cancer diagnosis. After living as an expat international teacher in Bangalore, India, Sandy wrote *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life: A memoir* as a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle. In the fall of 2022, Sandy's second book, *100 Things to Do in Boulder Before You Die*, will be published by Reedy Press. Connect with Sandy at [TheTravelingBornsteins.com](#) and [SandraBornstein.com](#).

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