

Wheel Together

The Adaptive Outdoor Education Center in Carrabassett Valley, Maine, will host the first Wheel Together retreat in July.

by *Brittany Martin*

Becoming paralyzed in

a skiing accident at age 19 set Monica Quimby on a path to find her true purpose — giving back by helping others with spinal-cord injuries (SCI) find support and move forward with their lives.

“My biggest advice is don’t give up, and even if you fail, fail upward,” the 35-year-old Florida resident says. “Success in any capacity is a lot of continuous hard work, failure — you learn the most from your mistakes — and give yourself time for reflection. It is crucial to know your ‘why.’ Also, it is a journey, so don’t be afraid to change course.”

A Maine native who sustained a level L1 SCI as a collegiate skier for the University of New Hampshire, Quimby is the founder of the Wheel Sister Foundation. She hopes to help others find their “why” during the

first Wheel Together Retreat for adults with SCI, in partnership with Wheel With Me Foundation, at the Adaptive Outdoor Education Center in Carrabassett Valley, Maine, July 7–11.

“It’s kind of like merging rec therapy together with art therapy. Really, the things we got when we first went to rehab, but the next level, so more goal-setting. Where do you want to be next? What do you want to do next? Those kinds of things,” Quimby says.

Quimby has accomplished plenty over the past 15 years. After earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in genetics/molecular biol-

A new retreat aims to help men and women with spinal-cord injuries set goals and forge relationships within the community.

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Monica Quimby says playing for Team USA's women's sled hockey team for the past eight seasons spurred her desire to help others find connections.

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Retreat attendees will have the opportunity to try adaptive water skiing, among many other activities.

ogy, teaching as an adjunct biological sciences professor at Southern Maine Community College, being chosen as Ms. Wheelchair Maine in 2011, earning a silver medal in paracanoe at the 2014 Lake Placid International Regatta in New York and being hired as the coordinator for the Illinois-based BACKBONES Leaders Program, Quimby wanted to leverage her passion for sports, advocacy and education to help others with disabilities learn to overcome perceived barriers and achieve their dreams.

In particular, her experience playing on Team USA women's sled hockey team for the past eight seasons spurred her desire to help people find connections and resources within the community.

"Just really connecting with that group of women, it really has pushed me more towards, we need more of this kind of connection so that it hits a broader base of people that have

been through spinal-cord injuries and have sustained these traumatic events, that we can come together and share our strengths," Quimby says.

She got the idea to start the Wheel Sister Foundation and put together a retreat after attending a 2019 retreat in Arizona that had accessibility issues. She was the only attendee who was paralyzed and used a wheelchair, and she says it made her feel truly disabled when what she needed was healing and recreation.

"There's different emotions and there's different things," Quimby says. "You know, sometimes I do miss walking. I remember how it feels when I would be able to walk in the sand and put my toes in the water. And if you say that to someone who's paralyzed, we get it, among other things. That's kind of where it started for me, because I was like, 'I don't know how comfortable I feel about sharing these things.' I felt alone, and a retreat's supposed to bring people together. So, by having this kind of a retreat, everybody is on the same page."

Growth & Connection

The Wheel Together Retreat will feature fully accessible activities, including adaptive water



COURTESY OF MONICA QUIMBY

Monica Quimby, right, earned a silver medal in paracanoe at the 2014 Lake Placid International Regatta in New York.



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skiing, kayaking and canoeing, hiking, adaptive climbing, fly fishing, journaling, vision boards, goal-setting, team-building, a group workout, visualization/meditation and more. Attendance will be limited to 10 men and women.

“So, being goal-oriented and having a past, present and future day is the way we are going to structure the activities,” Quimby says. “I also think it’s really important to create a network, so there’s at least going to be one of the participants out of the 10 that you’ll be able to connect with to help you move forward, including us and anyone else that’s there. And that’s what’s so important is that being collaborative and pushing each other forward.”

Collaboration is key for Quimby, which is why she’s partnered with local Maine businesses, including Petersen Water Skiing, Anti-Gravity Complex climbing gym and Confluence Collective fly fishing, as well as Adaptive Outdoor Education Center Director Kayla Lee and North Carolina resident Jesi Stracham



Jesi Stracham competes in adaptive CrossFit and owns Wheel With Me Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to serving the independence of wheelchair users.

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Stracham, who sustained a level T4 SCI at age 22 as a passenger on a motorcycle, says the retreat will help those with SCI connect with their own minds.

“A lot of this retreat is personal growth and development. There’s obviously some sports activities we’re going to do, but we’re going to do a lot of mental work together,” the now-29-year-old Stracham says. “So, it’s collaborating wheelchair users to realize that we’re not going through this journey alone and that you’re not alone in your struggle. You’re not alone in your mental being where you’re at, and you’re not alone in your disability. So, there’s people out there going through the same emotions, feelings, and we want to bring them together for a weekend of a camp. An adult summer camp? We don’t hear about that often, so let’s make it happen.”

She says she’s looking forward to seeing the connections people make and growth that occurs from the first day to last day, as well as campfires in the evenings.

JIM DUKE



Jesi Stracham partnered with Monica Quimby’s Wheel Sister Foundation to help others with spinal-cord injuries set goals.



COURTESY OF ERIK KONDO

Erik Kondo, right, will provide some adaptive sports equipment for retreat participants.

“[They will get] tools to continue to grow and develop their mental state and addressing their demons and what they perceive as limitations and really kind of changing their view of what they see as limitations and helping people just become the best version of them,” Stracham says. “That’s what humans are for. We’re here to uplift one another and serve one another, and not enough of us do it.”

Stracham currently hosts free virtual empowerment sessions for wheelchair users, where other wheelchair users teach their skills and expertise to the wheelchair community, but she says meeting in person removes the possibility of distraction. In addition, she says it’s good to have a mix of men and women, as well as older and newer injuries, because there are many events now aimed at women with disabilities.

“There’s nothing for men, and men need support honestly more than women because a lot of them are a lot weaker mentally. Just an observation,” Stracham says. “And men need support, too. They need that experience. They need to get in the community, get connected

and realize that their feelings are valid. Their feelings are absolutely valid, and they can grow and develop from that and be whatever they want to be.”

No Barriers

For Lee, hosting retreats like Wheel Together at the Adaptive Outdoor Education Center creates an opportunity for people to form friendships in a barrier-free space.

Set in Carrabassett Valley, a peaceful mountain recreation town nestled about a mile south of the Sugarloaf Mountain access road, the Adaptive Outdoor Education Center runs year-round adaptive recreation programming. The low-cost, hostel-style lodge opened in 2015 by the Albiston Foundation can sleep up to 25 people. It features eight shared bedrooms and eight bathrooms, including one wheel-in shower with a shower chair and seven wheel-in showers with fold-



COURTESY OF KAYLA LEE

Kayla Lee is the director of the Adaptive Outdoor Education Center in Carrabassett Valley, Maine.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY KAYLA LEE

down benches, as well as two yurts for large group gatherings. The center also is leading a fundraising effort to limit the costs for retreat attendees.

“As an adaptive recreation nonprofit, the most unique thing about us is we have this fully accessible lodge, and just the community that comes from it is totally my favorite thing,” Lee says. “At the end of the day, everyone gathered around the fireplace and sharing stories.”

Quimby and Stracham hope to make the retreat an annual event, and plans are already in the works for retreats in Florida and Arizona. Quimby also would like to expand the number of participants, as well as host separate retreats for women, men and veterans.

“I hope it brings awareness and visibility to our programs,” Stracham says. “It’s a good partnership to have. I’m excited to collaborate, and I hope it invites more people to collaborate with us as well, other organizations, because I know we’re both open to that because we’re both in that collaboration-over-competes mindset. The more we work together, the more people we can touch and impact and help them towards independence and living life to the fullest.”

For information, email Lee at infoAOEC@gmail.com or visit monicaquimby.wordpress.com or jesistracham.com. ■

The Adaptive Outdoor Education Center features eight shared bedrooms, top left, eight accessible bathrooms, top right, and an accessible main lobby area.