

Columbus Dispatch Commentary  
Ski bum has never acted her age, young or old  
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By [Mike Harden](#)



Photo by liz miles

Joan Woodruff, a 91-year-old hospice resident, uses a "ski slider" fitted with outriggers to ski at Mad River Mountain on Friday. She was helped by Steve Ricker, left, and David Holzer, volunteer ski instructors with the nonprofit Adaptive Adventure Sports Coalition.



Joan Woodruff

After more than 90 years, Joan Woodruff knows that you have to start while you're young if you want to make people understand that age has little to do with ability.

"I was driving a car when I was about 12," Woodruff said Monday from her residence at Westminster-Thurber Community in Columbus.

Her second-cousin Cher Oerbaugh noted, "At 16, she and her best friend joined a dance troupe that cruised the Great Lakes in the summertime. In her later life,

she hooked up with a guy who was a big-band trumpet player. She played keyboards. She was in her 80s, and they were still gigging."

Although Woodruff broke a hip a year ago and is now a client of Senior Independence Hospice because of congestive heart failure, her zest for adventure is undimmed.

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Hospice nurse Shellie Balogh was eager to interest the newcomer in a Senior Independence special-wish program called Make It Happen. "I asked Joan, 'If you could do anything in life one more time, what would it be?' " Balogh said. When Woodruff, 91, replied that she hadn't been snow skiing in years, Balogh assumed that her diminished health would limit such an excursion to the simulated slopes of the Wii version of the sport.

"No," Woodruff demurred, "that wouldn't be the same as snow skiing."

Balogh brainstormed with Liz Miles, a social-work grad student assigned to Senior Independence, and it wasn't long before the hospice team connected with the Adaptive Adventure Sports Coalition, a nonprofit group that helps the physically challenged participate in sports.

"I got a phone call about six weeks ago," said Steve Ricker, co-founder of the coalition and a volunteer ski instructor. "They said they had a 91-year-old woman who wanted to ski one more time and that she was in hospice. I said, 'OK, tell me more.' "

Working with Woodruff's hospice team, Ricker determined that she might be best suited for a ski slider, a device not unlike a walker with outboard skis attached to the legs.

When Woodruff was told she might hit the slopes, Oerbaugh said, "She sat down in the dining room with the two ladies she eats with -- one 88 and one 96 -- and asked, 'Would you like to hear a fairy tale?' "

Woodruff traveled to Mad River Mountain on Friday. "My biggest concern was that she would get short of breath," Balogh said. "But everything fell in place" with the help of a small oxygen tank.

"She was quite amazing," Ricker said. "There was a loose-fitting belt around her back, but that was all."

Miles planted a peck on Woodruff's cheek at the top of the hill. "Is that a goodbye kiss?" the irrepressible Joan asked.

"She went up on the bunny hill," Oerbaugh said. "Then she went up on the big hill. I cried. She was on skis almost two hours."

Asked if she had been worried, Woodruff said, "When you start, you think, 'I can't do this,' but you can. Just avoid anything that looks like it might trip you up."

It had been 11 years since Woodruff last skied.

Back in the van, with a big-band CD cranked up for the return trip to Westminster-Thurber, Miles asked Woodruff, "What are you going to tell people when you get back?"

"Nothing," she said. "They wouldn't believe me."

She paused and then added, "You just soar and soar and soar."

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