

# Showcasing the DNR: Skiing into the light

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## Skiing into the light

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There were so many people greeting each other with hugs and excitement one recent winter afternoon at the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' [Ralph A. MacMullan Conference Center](#) that people wandering into the Roscommon

facility might have thought they had stumbled into a family reunion.

Instead, it was not a family reunion but the beginning of the [Michigan Ski for Light](#) weekend of cross-country skiing for people with vision or mobility disabilities.



"We don't shake hands, we hug," said Geri Feigelson, vice president of Michigan Ski for Light, an all-volunteer organization that matches guides with skiers who are known as VIPs (vision-impaired participants) or MIPs (mobility-impaired participants).

With a legacy that goes back more than 40 years, the organization's annual ski weekend is a large gathering whose success comes from the connections and efforts of families, friends, community organizations and the DNR.

Michigan Ski for Light has its origins in the late 1970s.

Using a variety of Lansing-area locations, including Sleepy Hollow State Park in Clinton County, early organizer Harold Brunvand brought together friends, volunteers and the Sons of Norway to teach cross-country skiing to students from the Michigan School for the Blind.

According to Michigan Ski for Light's history, former Michigan First Lady Helen Milliken was among those volunteers. By the early 1980s, the organization began skiing at North Higgins Lake State Park in Crawford County and became a regional chapter of [Ski for Light](#).

John Root, one of the few remaining members of that founding group, attended this year's Michigan Ski for Light event at the DNR's RAM Center. He sat down to talk with a novice VIP as some of the weekend's nearly 100 attendees danced while a DJ played music.



"If you were to go out and talk with the average person on the street and ask, 'Would you believe that people who are blind can cross-country ski?' they would answer, 'I never thought they could,'" he said.

Sometimes, people with disabilities are led to believe

these same limiting misconceptions.

"I thought this type of sport was a no-go for me," said Austin Zell, after her first Michigan Ski for Light weekend. She was one of the event's mobility-impaired participants.

"It was really nice to experience something that anywhere else I probably wouldn't have," she said. "I probably would have cried, if my eyes hadn't been frozen!"

So how is it done exactly?

There is a different process for VIPs and MIPs.

Guides are matched with VIPs based on factors that include experience level, endurance and weight. The most novice VIPs are matched with the most experienced guides.

Many teams include a third person, a less-experienced guide who learns guiding skills from the other team members.

Over 24 years as a guide, Gary Earnley has developed a successful routine with the goal to "make the experience of the skier as joyful as possible."

Earnley and the VIP he's guiding get to know each other, go over the equipment and discuss expectations and communication styles and preferences. Some examples include finding out whether the VIP wants to use left and right or clock-face directions or what amount of description of the surrounding environment the VIP wants.

"Skiing with VIPs is all about communication," Earnley said. "It's so important to describe what we're experiencing, as well as anticipating things that they may experience."

Guides and VIPs ski side by side in double tracks.

Beginners, and those who needed to get reacquainted with their skills, took the Nursery Trail. A bronze statue of a shirtless "CCC boy" watched them travel around the mostly flat, looped trail near the [Higgins Lake Nursery/Civilian Conservation Corps Museum](#).

Intermediate and advanced skiers took a more challenging mile-long trail through the woods.

MIPs use a sit-ski, a frame on skis, and employ a double-pole technique to propel themselves forward. Their guides ski behind them.

Ted Ellickson, president of Michigan Ski for Light, is a MIP guide.



"I've had skiers who needed a tremendous amount of help at the beginning but by the end of the weekend, the end of the week or within a couple of years, need next to no help," he said.



Erin Bartolacci, an MIP who has attended Michigan Ski for Light for a decade, laughed about

some of the lighthearted fun the MIPs and their guides have had on the trail.

"They flipped me over on purpose," she said. "I look forward to this every year. The guides are great."

Feigelson, a VIP, began as a novice skier nearly 30 years ago. She said Michigan Ski for Light is a great way for people with disabilities to meet new people, get outdoors and experience a sense of freedom.

"Have fun, leave work behind," she said, encouraging others. "It's a chance to feel what it's like on a pair of skis and accomplish something that they've not done before, maybe go outside their comfort zone."

Stretching beyond familiar limits is a common achievement for VIP and MIP guides. Over the years, many started guiding without any prior experience of interacting with people who were blind or used a wheelchair.

"I came to understand that people with disabilities are just people," said Linda Hoogterp, a second-year VIP guide.

Her friend, Pam Albright, also a second-year VIP guide, said the guides and skiers formed a community based on cross-country skiing, not disability.



"It's like kayaking, like downhill skiing," she said. "When you're with a group of people that you have that common interest with, that common bond with, you mesh differently than in a roomful of people that have absolutely nothing in common."

Although VIPs, MIPs, guides and other volunteers come from across the state to participate in the Michigan Ski for Light weekend, Ellickson said he thinks the event would never happen without the

involvement and support of locals, including the [Roscommon Higgins Lake Lions Club](#) and the DNR.

"We come in one weekend a year, so the level of their commitment and effort is just astonishing," Ellickson said.

The Lions Club provides the opening-night dinner, snacks on the trails, a bonfire and transportation between the RAM Center and North Higgins Lake State Park.

Ellickson said the RAM Center is essentially a ski-in, ski-out facility that is affordable and can handle a group of 100-plus skiers.

Many people in Michigan Ski for Light can recall the time when then-RAM Center director Jim Scott came to the rescue after a local private cabin that usually housed the organization's college volunteers suddenly became unavailable. Scott hosted all the students at his own home.

The maintenance crew at North Higgins Lake State Park works with Bill Keith of Michigan Ski for Light. Keith acknowledged the staff there for many years of setting tracks and making sure the trails meet the needs of the VIPs and MIPs. One year, the park added a trailhead that allowed Michigan Ski for Light skiers and other recreational skiers a safe access to an intermediate trail.

"This is a group that proves that no matter how much you give, you get more in return," Ellickson said, including everyone who attends Michigan Ski for Light and the organizations' many partners.

Ellickson said the message of the annual event is the same today as it was more than 40 years ago: "Let's go out and have fun in the snow."

For information about accessible recreation at Michigan DNR sites, visit [Michigan.gov/DNRAccessibility](#).

Michigan Ski for Light is always looking for more people to bring into its family of cross-country skiing enthusiasts. More information is available at [MSFL.org](#).

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**/Note to editors:** Contact: [John Pepin](#), Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Downs.

[Text-only version of this story.](#)

**Center:** Ski for Light participants congregated recently at the Ralph A. MacMullan Center in Roscommon County.

**Event-1** and **Event-2:** Participants enjoy a sunny afternoon at the recent Ski for Light event in Roscommon County.

**Field:** Skiers cross a snowy field at the Ski for Light event in Roscommon County.

**Help:** A Ski for Light participant is helped toward the ski trails.

**Outing-1** and **Outing-2:** Participants in the Ski for Light event enjoy a beautiful afternoon at the Ralph A. MacMullan Conference Center in Roscommon County.

**Skiers:** Skiers move through the snow during the recent Ski for Light event.

**Snow:** Two Ski for Light participants talk with each other as snow falls lightly over Roscommon County./

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