

Almost There: An Interview With Eric Friedman (Jazz Music)

Marshall: You are listening to Mr. Radio and I'm your host Marshall. The Mad River Valley includes Duxbury, Fayston, Moretown, Waitsfield, and Warren, Vermont, as well as the Sugarbush Resort & Mad River Glen resort and today's guest has played a major role in their development. My guest has received numerous awards for his work including the Vermont Ski Areas Association Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his leadership and contribution to the Vermont Ski Industry, the National Ski Areas Association Sales & Marketing Award recognizing Mad River Glen's use of social media to promote skiing, the North American Snowsports Journalist Associations Bob Gillen Award for Achievement In Snowsports Public Relations and Communications, the National Ski Areas Association Sales & Marketing Award which recognized the Mad River Glen's Kids Free Pass Program and he was recognized as the Mad River Valley Rotary Club's Person of the Year.

Currently the Executive Director of the Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce in Waitsfield, Vermont, it is my pleasure to introduce Eric Friedman.
Welcome to the show Eric.

Eric: Thanks Marshall, great to be here.

Marshall: Let's see where I want to start, I take it from all of the awards that you've received, that you have a passion for skiing, is that correct?

Eric: Absolutely. I've been skiing since I was two years old growing up in New Jersey. I didn't realize until much later on in life that not every kid from New Jersey skied

four days a week, but I did when I was a little kid and, uh, having intense passion for it. And it's kind of directed me in my life.

Marshall: Did your parents ski?

Eric: My father was a very avid skier and my grandfather was as well, which is pretty uncommon for like a Jew for Jewish people from Newark. But it's, uh, yeah, my father was a volunteer ski patrolman and for many years, and, uh, I said I was brought up skiing every single weekend and going up and racing on Tuesday and Thursday nights in New Jersey and, uh, being, I was started being on the racing team when I was six, seven years.

Marshall: Well, that answers my next question. I was going to say, do you do cross country skiing, but it seems like you do competitive skiing? Or do you do both?

Eric: No, I did competitive skiing all the way through high school. I now cross country ski, and back country ski quite a bit because we can go right out my door here in Vermont and do that. But I am a decidedly, Alpine skier.

Marshall: What role does the ski industry take in The Mad River Valley, is the economy dependent on the ski industry?

Eric: You know, it's interesting knowing the history of it. This was a very depressed area. Um, very much a rural farming community before the advent of the ski industry in the late forties and early fifties, and as the ski industry grew the Mad River Valley, as well as all of the other ski related communities in Vermont and throughout New

England became more and more dependent upon it. It's absolutely an important part of it. I'm really glad to say. While the winter time, it's still very, very important and it drives the economy locally. We're a much more diverse community economically today than we were even 20 or 30 years ago. So the summer business here is, uh, is every bit as good as it is in the winter. A little bit different, different people, different demographics. We're a much more well-rounded economically.

Marshall: Since you did start skiing, when you were a little kid and, uh, all of the, uh, events that you've taken part in you're you're obviously a very knowledgeable skier. My skiing history verges on the, the novice. I started on wooden skis with bear trap clamps and I really never moved up to today's technology, but you've been involved in several skiing endeavors, including, and I don't know if this still is, uh, taking place, but the Alpine Zone, ski area challenge. Is that still an existence, can you explain it?

Eric: Oh yeah, I'll say that's funny that you found that the Alpine zone is a, is one of the older online ski communities and I've participated reluctantly over the years with it. It's amazing how much the online community. How important it is to the ski industry and how it's really changed the ski industry in a lot of ways.

Marshall: What was your role or is your role in that? Do you answer questions? What do you do there?

Eric: I was just on it as a, you know, as a member of that ski community. And I did so more out of necessity than anything else. It's not something that I, you know, I would say I enjoy, but it's really important. And as a way

to communicate with the the outer world of skiing, uh, and it's, it's very popular. And, and I think I took a very different approach to talking to those people as opposed to many of my colleagues in the ski industry. I think I've always had a very different take on promoting ski areas than my colleagues had. Initially was kind of gratifying as you hang around long and you see things change. And I think the industry really gravitated to what I was doing, which was unusual at the time, but isn't today.

Marshall: I said, I started out with wooden skis and I'm really a novice in the audiences that is listening to this show. As a matter of fact, I may know the term bunny slope

Eric: (laughs)

Marshall: or something, that's probably where I belong. But The Mad River Glen has been described as New England's Telemark Mecca.

Eric: Yep.

Marshall: What, for the people, including myself who don't know what Telemark is, what is Telemark?

Eric: Telemark, skiing is kind of a throwback to the way skiing used to be. It's, it's a just different kind of equipment. It's a free heel like that. Like a cross country ski is as a, you know, so you can lift your heel up, uh, and you make a different kind of a turn and it's, what's called a Telemark turn. And in the early days of skiing in the. Early in the modern era, early days of skiing in the early 20th century, when skiing became a recreational sport, as opposed to just transportation, you know as

opposed to transportation, that's what the skis were like. And with the advent of stiffer boots and, uh, and heavier boots and, uh, bindings that were more secure Telemark skiing sort of went away. And then in the 1970s and eighties, it really started coming back in pockets. And it was something that was really a big thing at Mad River Glen, because a lot of those people enjoyed it because it was a good way of getting of getting into the back country by having a free heel you can, it's more like a cross country ski. So you can go up with, with climbing skins, you can go up. And because of the nature of Mad River Glen's terrain, it was something that people were into interestingly, nowadays over the last 10 years or so telemarking has really gone away. Because of the fact that Alpine touring equipment has progressed to the point where you can have hard plastic boots and have a free heel that you can turn when you get to the top locked down. And there is a reason that, you know, skiing went the way that it did and, and went away from Telemark because, you know, having a fixed heel and having good stiff plastic boots really made skiing a lot easier for people. So things keep changing.

Marshall: Telemark is not a competitive sport?

Eric: Uh, it is, there's some there's, it's in a very esoteric way. Um, there are people that do compete in Telemark ski racing, but it's a pretty esoteric sport.

Marshall: And are the skis different from cross-country skis, how exactly?

Eric: They're wider. They're more like a conventional Alpine ski. Yeah. That's basically it. And you know, people put skins on them so we can go uphill with them.

Marshall: So the advantage would be that you could go up a hill easily. With Telemark than you could with cross country skis?

Eric: Well, more than more as opposed to Alpine cross country skiing is more up and down, you know, uh, you know, undulating kind of terrain. And what most people are doing now is they're going up a mountain to, for the purpose of skiing down it, cross country skis are not fun to go down a hill on.

Marshall: My experience with that. I was cross country skiing in Michigan, and we got off the trail somehow and we ended up on a downhill ski slope. Way at the top. And I asked one of the skiers, there, "Is this the cross country trail?" And he goes, "Oh no, this is Big Chief mountain!" You know, and I really didn't want to go down on that. Although I had a neighbor who went downhill on cross country skis, but that's another story.

Eric: Yes, it's certainly thrilling.

Marshall: What geography does the Mad River Valley comprise?

Eric: Well, The Mad River Valley is, is pretty much dead center in the middle of the state, we're about at 20 minutes west of the capital of Montpelier, we are, as the name suggested it is a river valley. The Mad River runs from the mountains into the Winooski river, which lets out in Burlington area into Lake Champlain. The Mad River Valley encompasses the watershed in the towns that you mentioned. The river starts in way up high in the mountains of Warren, and travels through Waitsfield and

Moretown and extending to the confluence with the Winooski River further downstream. And so the Mad River Valley, well, most people think of it as Warren Waitsfield and Fayston. Then we also include Moretown because it is part of the watershed. Uh, and Duxbury nominally as well, but Moretown and Duxbury are kind of the there's no town centers. There's not a lot of commerce going on in either one of those towns. So we're sort of the forgotten and I live in Moretown. So we're sort of the forgotten towns sometimes. And I think that what's interesting and unique about the geography here is that we're all very much tied together by the river. And Waitsfield is our collective downtown Warren has a small village, but Waitsfield is the commerce center of the valley. And so I think that while we have separate towns with separate schools, elementary schools, we are very much tied together. By the river and bound by the mountains that formed the valley. And we have a real good collective spirit and sense of community here, um, that it's not town by town, which is somewhat unique in Vermont. The Mad River Valley, for example, had the first multi town planning district in the United States that started back in the 1970s. There's a, a collective sense of community that is unique.

Marshall: Is this collective sense related to the Mad River Glen Cooperative?

Eric: No. I think that the, the matter of Glen cooperative in the ski area, I think epitomizes that sense of community in many ways, I think that from someone that was very involved in Mad River Glen and, and, and for 24 years, and was there from the day that the co-op started, I don't think it would've happened in a lot of other places.

And I think that the sense of community that we have here and the closeness of it enabled, The Mad River Glen cooperative to succeed.

Marshall: How exactly does the cooperative work? Because I, I'm only familiar with cooperatives in urban areas

Eric: Yeah.

Marshall: So,

Eric: And they're not, and they're not, and they're not very different. Uh, they're not very different from a, from a food co-op or an electrical co-op or an insurance cooperative or a real estate cooperative. It is a unique vehicle for this core ski area. Uh, it's the only cooperatively owned non-for-profit ski area in the United States. Created by the previous owner of the mountain, because she wanted to create a vehicle to sell the ski area to the only people she felt she could trust not to mess it up. And those were the skiers themselves. So she created this idea. They were a couple of iterations of it before it came about. But Betsy Pratt, who was the former owner of Mad River and owned it for 25 odd years really was a steward of the mountain and wanted to make sure that it didn't get messed up. So she sold it to the skiers themselves. Interestingly, in the mid nineties, it was a time when the, uh, consolidation of the ski industry was just beginning companies like the American Ski Company was the first big conglomerative ski areas and which is, you know, ubiquitous today. It was, we were really flying in the face of everything that was going on in the American Ski Company actually owned Sugar Bush, which was our neighboring ski area,

uh, which is just three or four miles down the road. The owner of American Ski Company famously offered Betsy Pratt, a, uh, a check for what was believed to be \$5 million for the ski area. And Betsy was a classic and she smoked a corncob pipe. I'm not making this up. And she took a big drag off of the pipe and blew the smoke in his face and told him exactly where he could stick his check.

Marshall: (laughs)

Eric: And she then proceeded to turn around the next year, sell the ski area to the skiers for two and a half million dollars. And she lent us the money with the five-year interest free note to sell the shares to do it. So she really wanted it to happen. The plan was to sell 2000 shares of the cooperative, at \$1,500 a piece. And the idea of that would be that we'd raise \$4 million, that she would get two and a half million dollars, and then we'd have a million and a half dollars worth of operating capital to keep the ski area up and running. We had to sell 1,667 shares to pay Betsy off and she gave us five years to do it and we sold it in three, paid her off and kept selling shares. And today we have I believe it's about 2300 shares sold to that 1900 individual people. And it is truly a democracy and a very, very unique way to run a ski area. Especially in this day and age.

Marshall: You mentioned Sugar Bush.

Eric: Yeah.

Marshall: You have two rival organizations, I believe in your area, Stowe Area Association, then Revitalizing Waterbury. How do you work collaboratively with these organizations to promote?

Eric: Well, it's a little bit different in that, um, Sugarbush Resort is absolutely part of our community Mad River Glen and Sugarbush are two ski areas that are very, very different and compliment each other beautifully.

Sugarbush has a corporately owned resort and has all of the amenities of a big resort and Mad River is what Mad River is. You know, like I said, they compliment one another beautifully and you can actually, you know, hike from one it to the, over to the other, only about a mile apart, along the Long Trail which is the end to end hiking trail in Vermont. Uh, and I said about three or four miles drive from, from Mad River over to, to Mount Ellen area of Sugarbush. So we're tied at the hip. The ski areas are tied tied at the hip and very much both of them very much tied to the local community. We are, as I mentioned earlier, directly in the dead center of the middle of the state. Just north of us. If you drive north on fabled, route 100, you'll come to the town of Waterbury, which is famous for Ben and Jerry's ice cream and the Alchemist Brewery. And it's a great community there. And, um, they're, you know, maybe 15 minutes drive from, from Waitsfield to Waterbury. And if you keep going north on route 100 past Waterbury, Is the village of Stowe and Stowe Mountain Resort, which is up there and the self-proclaimed ski capital of the east. So the region that route 100 Carter, which we like to refer to as the best of route 100 is what we have in common is, outdoor recreation. That's why people come to a region generally. What's why they go to Stowe and that's why they go to Waterbury. That's why they go to the Mad River Valley and we've recognized that, and our organizations work together to bring more people to our region because when we bring more people to our region, all three areas benefit.

Uh, and so many of them. Uh, you know, when we're at our visitor center here in The Mad River Valley, people come in and they're, they're staying up in Stowe, or they're staying in Waterbury. They drive down a here. We send people up to Waterbury. We send people to Stowe among other places in central Vermont. And it's one of the great things about where we live is if you were right in the middle of the state and you can be in Burlington in 45 minutes, you can be in Montpelier and Barre in 20 minutes, half hour. So it was just up the road and. There's lots to do and lots of different things to do, which is nice. So we would like to try to work together to, to promote the whole region, as well as the state generally.

Marshall: I mentioned in my intro that in 2019, you became the executive director of the Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce. And in your bio, you state that you had to re invent this position over the past year and a half because of the pandemic. Could you explain some of the changes that needed to be made because of the pandemic?

Eric: It was. Seminal moment for our community, just like it was for, um, communities all around the country our scare is when the pandemic happened, I remember distinctly it was March 17th, 2020. It was a great ski day. And it was know towards the end of the ski season. And, you know, the ski areas closed the very next day and they didn't reopen, which was very unusual. So the local hospitality industry really took it on the chin. Um, you know, when the inns and lodges and restaurants have to close up. That's our bread and butter here. And for the business to just dry up, literally overnight was the

tough thing. I was hired by the chamber of commerce. And I took the position because of my marketing abilities and my abilities to be passionate about talking about our community and encouraging people to come here. And after six or seven months of doing that and, uh, the pandemic happened I got thrust into this new role of being the cheerleader for our community. Being the, I got involved in lobbying efforts with the state and federal government. I got involved in being an advocate for our business community, as well as being a, um, sounding board and almost a counselor. Um, you know, I, I do, I have lived here a long time. Um, most of all of the business owners, I knew them personally. I knew their kids, our kids grew up together having to have conversations to these people, calling me up, literally in tears, over and over again, with their businesses and their livelihoods being threatened really turned what the chamber of commerce was from being, uh, uh, a promote, you know, promoting our area to coming together, to help save our business community. And it was a really gratifying thing to be involved in. And I am so proud of the fact that this community really pulled together. Like we always do. I think that, again, it epitomizes what this community is all about.

Marshall: I just want to jump to a 2013 film that the Mount Mansfield Media Productions Produced. They did a little mini documentary called ["Almost There"](#). And for listeners who want to watch this, I will put a link to the, uh, film in the show notes, but it's got over 4,000 subscribers that are watching this thing. And more than 50,000 views, basically it's an unscripted film about the community, the locals call Vermont's Mad River Valley, and they like to add that visitors "Come to the mountains, but they stay for the valley." Again, I will

provide the link for the show. What was the motivation behind this film?

Eric: It was actually a production of the chamber of commerce we hired. Um, and I say we, I was on the, before I was the executive director I was on the board of the chamber for 12 years and my capacity at Mad River, Glen. So if anyone should have known not to take this job, it should have been me, but I decided to do it anyway. We wanted to do something really. It's really unique. We knew, you know, what we know about our community is that it is not a, um, it's not a contrived place. It is very much a unique organic kind of a place that has developed over many years with many layers to it. We didn't feel like you could promote it properly in a traditional way. And we wanted to tell the story of what this community is really all about. And I think Mansfield Media did a really, really nice job of articulating what is so special about the Mad River Valley and why it's unique. And I think that, you know, one of the things I always hear from, you know, from people that visit here is that it's so unlike any place else they ever come in the world and that, uh, there's a deep sense of place to it. Uh, and the second that you get here, you realize like, this is just not your typical place. It's not, it's not money driven. People are here because it speaks to them for a number of different reasons. Sure, there are a lot of people that came here for the skiing and came to visit and ended up staying. But there's a lot of people that, uh, that they had no interest in the skiing at all and everyone is just tied to this community one way or another. And again, I think so much of it is because of that geography and we go back to it. Uh, and what it's, it's the ties that bind us.

Marshall: I picked a couple of clips from the movie that I'd like to play and maybe we can comment on them. Um, so let's see if we have a clip from Janice Hurley Hollis, and she's the director of operations for the Inn at Round Barn Farm, and she opens up with a rather shocking. Statement, let's take a listen to it.

Janice: And I didn't realize what it meant to not have a stoplight until I was in the city. I was stopped at a stop light for quite some time. And then I realized you lose a lot of your life sitting at stoplights and that doesn't happen here because we don't have one. So you just live.

Marshall: Is that true, you have no stoplights?

Eric: Yeah, (laughing) I couldn't help but laugh because we don't have a stop light and what was funny is I, as I mentioned earlier, I live in Moretown and after tropical storm, Irene about a dozen years ago, the bridge got washed out or part of it. And, um, they had to put a light up because it only was open for one way traffic. So they put a temporary light up and the community freaked out over it. It was kind of funny. Oh my God. Now we have a stoplight, but it was temporary. Unfortunately it went away.

Marshall: You also have route 17 does route 17 play a role in the valley?

Eric: Route 17 is our escape valve west Route 17 is also known as the McCullough Turnpike and it was a dirt road that went up to Mad River Glen and ended at Mad River Glen in the late forties and then subsequently was paved and then went up over the top. It was actually a

CCC project initially. And then it went up over the mountain over what's called Appalachian Gap and down the backside into the town of Lincoln and out towards Burlington. So now it is a state highway and it is the highest gap road in Vermont, that's kept open year round.

Marshall: You also have a lot of family farmers in the film, including Sebastian Von Trapp, and there's one guy, Donny, Jocelyn,

Eric: You're gonna make me cry Marshall.

Marshall: He was a farmer in the film that had perhaps the only negative view let's listen to what he had to say.

Donnie: They all talk about the view but deer tracks and scenery make a pretty thin stew. You can't eat the view.

Marshall: Now in case you had trouble understanding what he said it was, "They all talk about the view but deer tracks and scenery make a pretty thin stew. You can't eat the view." Why would he say that, are farmers having a rough time making a living?

Eric: Yeah, well I think, you know, Donnie and I said, you're going to make me cry on this. Cause uh, Donny passed away in the last year and he was a remarkable guy. He grew up in a very poor family that they worked really hard. And the Vermont hill farms were always a tough way to make a living. And when he passed away in the last year, he was still living in a house without plumbing, with very limited electricity. And he had his farm is was unarguably one of the most beautiful pieces of real estate in the entire state of Vermont, which is a

pretty damn nice state yet people would always walk along on his road and say, oh my God, you're so lucky to live here, you have this view it's incredible. But Donnie was a real true classic Vermonter. And I think like his real hard scrabble existence for him growing up. But I think what was really interesting about him is that how. The people that moved here, you know, Donny was someone, his family has been here since the late 17 hundreds. And it was one of the original families that settled this town. He had a great deal of respect from the rest of the community here, you know, the skiers and the people that came later appreciated him and appreciated his farm and what he did there that being said farming is brutal, it's a tough way to make a living, especially dairy farming, which is what most of the farms around here are. What's really amazing about this community, as opposed to some of the other quote, unquote tourist communities. And we certainly consider ourselves a touristy place at some level, but we're really proud of the fact that our farmers have really adapted while there is a traditional dairy farmer. Who's still around here. Most of them are doing a lot of value added products, you know, like Von Trapp farm, where they are not only growing or raising, uh, dairy cows but they are producing world-class cheese there and selling other products. Like, you know, they're, they're raising beef, they're raising pork, they're raising local vegetables and local maple syrup and all of that. And the farms that are doing that here are being successful by changing their business models. And there's young farmers coming into the industry. And it's, what's really valuable about that is not only is it great press because we get wonderful local food and we don't have the supply chain issues that a lot of places have. The Mad River Valley has been, the home was doing farm to table food long

before it became cool. These farms are not only important because of their food production, but they're also important because they keep the land open and they keep the pastoral beauty of this area, which is why people come here to recreate. So it benefits us in many different ways and just add so much texture to the fabric of our community.

Marshall: We are unfortunately running out of time here, but I do have a quick, although it's probably not going to be a quick answer. You mentioned that you're a touristy destination is it being gentrified and if so, how are you regulating that?

Eric: Just like so many rural communities around the country, the pandemic has rapidly increased the pace of people moving here in some ways. That's great. We are the oldest state. We're the second oldest state in the country, Main's older than us. So getting new families here is not necessarily a bad thing, but we have a tremendous housing crisis. Our people can't afford to stay here. Our children can't afford to stay here and live here and there's limited job opportunities for them. So they feel the need to go away. Both of my kids, uh, are 22 and 24 years old have moved away to go to school. And I don't think intend to come back anytime soon. It's tough. Our property values have increased dramatically, and this is something, you know, it concerns us and it's just like, it is in every other community like ours, around Vermont and around new England and around the country. Um, we're struggling with a lot of the same issues, but what I'm really proud of is the fact that I think The Mad River Valley will always look at things in a different way and we will solve our problems in the Mad River way, just like Mad River Glen, like whoever would

have thought that saving the ski area with the co-op no one ever would have thought that, but it happened here because the idea came about, and I am sure that our community is going to be creative and be engaging and create a Mad River way out of our situation and make sure that this community is protected, one way or another.

Marshall: Eric, you know, I have another half hour's worth of questions, but, uh, but, uh, I know we, we had agreed on a certain amount of time, so I'd like to close our show with the theme song from "Almost There" which was written and sung by Suzie Brown, a practicing cardiologist whose pursuing a career in singing her own songs and playing the guitar and Eric Friedman I'd like to talk to you again some time I'm happy that you were able to take the time to speak with me and I hope to hear from you again, real soon.

Eric: It was nice being with you and I really appreciate the opportunity.

(Music)

[Suzie Brown](#) singing "Almost There"

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(Music)

[Suzie Brown](#) singing "Almost There"