

THE DOUBLE LIFE

How the owner of Tahoe City, California's Alpenglow Sports hosted backcountry festivals and events—all while secretly too sick to ski

as told by **Brendan Madigan**

In winter 2018, Brendan Madigan, owner of Alpenglow Sports in Tahoe City, California, was in the midst of his shop's 10-day Mountain Festival, an annual event packed with activities like introductory backcountry ski tours, avalanche safety workshops and skate skiing clinics. By day, Madigan was all smiles, hustling from event to event, coordinating logistics and running the shop. But unbeknownst to anyone outside of Madigan's inner circle, he was silently suffering. After three years of battling an unknown acute respiratory illness, he'd finally been diagnosed with eosinophilic pneumonia, a rare lung disorder. Once an ultrarunner and fervent backcountry skier, Madigan was suddenly fatigued from simply walking up stairs. Ski touring was out of the question. So, instead, he decided to focus on helping other people get into the mountains—even when he could not. —*Megan Michelson*

I'm no Chadwick Boseman, but I can relate to keeping my illness private, because I had a business to run, I had events to put on. I'm also just a very private person. It was all I could do to get through some of those events, like Outdoor Retailer or Mountain Festival. At the time, I was living a double life. Nobody really knew what was going on with me.

The drugs they put me on created insomnia. I'd wake at 2 a.m. and work from home for eight hours, then go into the shop for the rest of the day. I couldn't exercise, so I started logging 18- to 20-hour workdays to fill my time.

Ultimately, the doctors couldn't heal me. That was when I decided to take matters into my own hands. I took a deep dive into my diet. I transitioned to a full vegan, plant-based diet. That helped. I'm a firm believer that the kind of food you put in your body can reduce inflammation or boost existing inflammation. I finally went on an asthma drug, which wasn't a miracle, but it was a slow build to feeling better.

In the summer of 2019, I started riding my bike and hiking. Really low mileage, low heart rate. I still didn't have much energy. But I felt good enough to think, "If this is all I can do, at least I can be in the mountains." I'd made my peace with being slow. That was its own journey.

Last winter, I got a handful of ski touring days in. It felt so good to be back on skis again. It used to be that when people would come into the shop and say, "Have you been out skiing?" It was this soul-crushing question. I wouldn't even know how to respond.

Of course, I would love to go ski touring with my friends like I used to. It's been a paradigm shift for me. But I've decided I have to find value in putting on these events that others can benefit from. Inspiring others has to be where I find my purpose now.

I've always encouraged the staff at Alpenglow to connect with the people who come in the door on a human level. It doesn't matter how excellent or not they are at their chosen sport. The fact is we have commonality and shared passion and at the end of the day, we're humans who want to be a part of something.

"Can I help you?" is the most boring, easy question for a shop employee to ask a customer. Instead ask, "How is your day going? What have you been up to?" Anything to break down that potential barrier. I think that's what good humans should do: connect with other people. Or try to, anyway. That's particularly poignant right now, with so much injustice, upheaval and division in the world.

Shop owner and dedicated community member Brendan Madigan pauses outside his Alpenglow Sports store in Tahoe City, California. **By Ming Poon**

