

**BE FREE**

HOW SKIING BECAME  
ONE FAMILY'S UNLIKELY  
AMERICAN DREAM

Words MEGAN MICHELSON

**THE** U.S. Air Force cargo plane from Saigon was packed with row after row of refugees. It was April 1975 and the South Vietnamese capital was about to fall to the North Vietnamese Army, largely ending the Vietnam War. On the plane, sisters Cúc Kim Hùynh, then 16, and Liên Kim Hùynh, then 18, their parents and four more siblings were fleeing for fear of persecution, leaving behind most of their extended family and the only home they'd ever known. Cúc clutched a family photo album, her only personal possession.

"We were overwhelmed with sadness and the thought of having no country," Liên says. "This feeling was indescribable; it was like losing a family member."

Upon arriving in the United States, the Hùynhs spent three months in tents at a makeshift refugee camp at Camp Pendleton, near San Diego. The family moved to Inglewood, in southwestern Los Angeles, where they learned English and got whatever jobs they could—taxi driver, busboy, typist. Cúc and Liên finished school—Cúc went on to study engineering, while Liên learned computer programming.

Growing up in Vietnam, a tropical country, Cúc and Liên would pore over picture books that showed a season they didn't know:

winter. They became fascinated with stories showing children sledding, skiing and ice-skating. "I thought, wouldn't that be cool? To live in a place where it's not hot and have snow falling down?" Cúc says. "That's how it all started, from something I dreamed about."

They wondered what it would feel like to touch snow, to see it falling from the sky. "For someone who has never seen snow, it's impossible to describe it," Liên says. "Snow is beautiful and has always been a curiosity of mine. I always wanted to experience it."

Little did they know that years later, the two sisters would raise daughters of their own, two girls who would grow up to become skiers, sharing their passion for snow in a way their mothers could never have dreamed.



Sisters Cúc Hùynh (age 16) and Liên Hùynh (age 18) pose for a portrait in the summer of 1975 at Camp Pendleton, a Vietnam War refugee camp outside San Diego, within a few months of their family's escape from Vietnam.  
Photo: Norman Family Archives

"Girls couldn't do sports, and I resented that. I always felt like I was different. We had a small house with tight living quarters, so I always preferred to be outdoors, to be free." —Cúc Hùynh



Sasha (left) and Krystin (right) filmed their *Nexus* pre-trailer in the fall of 2021 in North Bend, WA, after not having skied together since they were children.  
Photo: Ryan French



Sasha (age 8) shreds spring pow in the Hobacks at Jackson Hole, WY. Steve and Cúc camped at Jenny Lake in Grand Teton National Park on their honeymoon. They brought the kids back to Jackson Hole every year after that.  
Photo: Dingle Family Archives

"I've always belonged in skiing, and I feel lucky that my sport takes place outside, because I've always belonged there, too."—Sasha Dingle

**VIETNAM WAS NOT** an easy country to grow up in during the '60s and '70s, especially for women. "Girls couldn't do sports and I resented that. I always felt like I was different," Cúc says. "We had a small house with tight living quarters, so I always preferred to be outdoors, to be free."

Years later, in her early 20s, Cúc visited California's Big Bear, where she walked on snow for the first time. It was as magical as she'd always imagined it would be. Cúc was working as an engineer at IBM at the time and it was there that she met fellow engineer Steve Dingle. The two began dating and Steve, who was from Vermont, invited Cúc back home for Thanksgiving, where he took her skiing at Sugarbush during the holiday break. When Steve went for a few solo runs, Cúc attempted to snowplow down an icy beginner hill. She promptly tore her ACL.

That didn't turn her off from skiing, however. Once she'd recovered, Cúc was back at it. She returned to the bunny hill, vibrant and ready, a clunky knee brace strapped to the outside of her bright one-piece suit. It was the 1980s and Cúc had found her calling. "I remember the sensation was scary at first, but I liked being outdoors and seeing the scenery. It's exhilarating when you ski a challenging run," Cúc says. "I said, 'This is my sport, I love it.'" She and Steve took regular trips to Tahoe and Jackson Hole. When they settled in Vermont, where they both worked as engineers, they got season passes to Sugarbush.

In March of 1986, Cúc invited Liên on a birthday trip to Jackson Hole. It was Liên's first time downhill skiing. "I borrowed ski clothing from Cúc and rented equipment for the week. Everything fit poorly," Liên says. But the sight and feel of sliding down snow captivated her.

A year later, Liên met a mogul skier on a chairlift at Big Bear, a U.S. Ski Team athlete by the name of Pete Norman. "I had been watching him ski throughout the day and was amazed that

there was someone who actually skied like people in the movies," Liên says. They got married that spring, in 1987, on the tram at Heavenly in South Lake Tahoe, CA.

At home in Westlake Village near Los Angeles, Liên and Pete had Ian and then Krystin, teaching both to ski at Big Bear and Mount Baldy. Krystin was named after the word "crystal," like a snowflake, Liên says. During a ski trip to June Mountain near Mammoth, Ian asked his parents, "Do we have to go home?" With that, in 1995, Liên and Pete decided to move to a ski town so they'd never have to leave the mountains again.

"Our children loved being on snow. So we adjusted our career path to fulfill the dream of moving to Lake Tahoe and living in snow country," says Liên, who worked as a computer programmer.

The family moved into a condo across the street from Heavenly in South Lake Tahoe, where they could see classic runs like the Face and Gunbarrel from their window. "Skiing was our most unifying activity," Krystin says. "It wasn't even a question. We all went skiing together." Krystin and Ian joined Heavenly's race team and later trained in moguls, aerials and ski ballet.

Across the country in Jericho, VT, Cúc and Steve were raising two children as well, Sasha and Adrian, who were roughly the same ages as their California cousins. They spent every weekend at Sugarbush, where the two siblings became accomplished skiers. "There wasn't a lot to do in rural Vermont other than be outside, so my introduction to backcountry skiing was walking around the woods on cross-country skis with my family," Sasha says.

Every year, Cúc and Liên would get their families together to ski. "We are sisters, two years apart, and in a Vietnamese family you have close ties with your siblings," Liên says. "After marriage, we lived far apart from each other and didn't get to do as much together. But skiing brought our families together."

**SASHA AND KRYSTIN** continued following their passion for skiing, but not as the singular entity their mothers had once imagined. Krystin coached freeride programs at Crystal Mountain and Alpentel in Washington state and, in 2018, with help from K2 Skis and Fremont Brewing, she launched the SheJumps Snowpack Scholarship to give women access to avalanche education. “I grew up skiing. It was given to me as a gift,” Krystin says. “But not everyone gets that. I wanted other women to be able to afford avalanche safety courses without that barrier to education.”

Sasha, meanwhile, found her place in skiing too. After spending a year teaching in Vietnam on a Fulbright scholarship, Sasha returned to the United States and won the Freeskiing World Tour in 2013, earning a coveted spot on the Freeride World Tour. Sasha carved her own path, but she also recognized that the ski industry didn’t exactly reflect the wide, diverse community she’d learned to thrive in beyond the resort boundaries.

“I don’t feel like I belong in the ski industry in the form of representation or access to sponsorships and opportunities outside of those that I’ve built myself through winning competitions,” Sasha says. “But I’ve always belonged in skiing, and I feel lucky that my sport takes place outside because I’ve always belonged there too.”

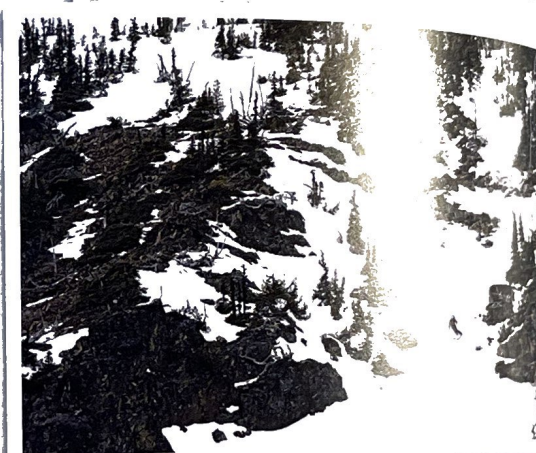
Sasha competed on the Freeride World Tour for a year but began battling chronic pain, forcing her to lean heavily into meditation and mindfulness as a means to recovery. Now 34 years old, she’s left competing behind and runs a meditation business in Victor, ID, called Mountain Mind Project, where she trains athletes and others in meditation for resilience and better performance. Krystin, 32, works as a senior coffee quality specialist at Starbucks in Seattle.

Both have worked and competed as professional skiers, yet they hadn’t had a chance to ski together since they were kids. Those divergent paths reunited finally on a brilliant, clear day at Crystal Mountain, WA, when the cousins climbed into the gondola together. From the top they could see Mount Rainier slathered in early-morning light. They hiked Silver King, a towering inbounds peak at Crystal, scouting their lines. From the top, Sasha ripped big, arcing turns down a smooth face, while Krystin picked her way through a more technical route. “While Sasha and I have a lot in common, we’re also very different people,” Krystin says. “We have different energy levels and unique ways of looking at the hill.”

They were there filming a part for *Nexus*, a new, narrative-driven ski movie, which was released in the fall of 2022. The Arc’teryx project tells the story of women skiers through their connections to each other and the world around them. For Krystin and Sasha, that meant sharing their own stories, but also those of their mothers, Cúc and Liên—two women who crossed oceans and learned to live in a new country, who taught their daughters they could be anything they wanted.



Cúc blew out her ACL while on a date with Steve—it was his second time skiing. Krystin was 1992, a year after knee surgery. She picked up cross-country and began moving on snow. Photo: Dingle Family Archives



Sasha draws upon her Freeride World Tour background as she navigates through Crystal Mountain, WA’s lift-served backcountry. Crystal Mountain is Krystin’s home resort, and their film project presented a unique opportunity for her to take Sasha to some of her favorite zones. Photo: Katie Lozancich

All the members of the Dingle family were comfortable as disrupters. Steve was an early adopter of snowboarding in Vermont. Steve (age 6, bottom right) spent all his time in the halfpipe and building jumps and rails in the backyard. Sasha (age 9, bottom left) loved how in ski gear it was hard to tell if she was a girl or a boy. Photo: Dingle Family Archives

**IN MAY 2021**, Krystin was digging dirt at Red Bull Formation, a women's freeride mountain bike event in southern Utah, when she met Katie Lozancich, a photographer working on the *Nexus* project. When Krystin saw the *Nexus* trailer online, she reached out to Lozancich and the other filmmakers. "I love what you're doing," she wrote. "But I think something is missing—and what's missing is our story."

Krystin wanted to show that you don't have to come from a long lineage of skiers to become a skier yourself, that a family connection to skiing can start in a single generation. "Someone against all odds—like our mothers—can discover skiing and fall in love with it," Krystin says.

She proposed to the filmmakers that they film a segment about her and her cousin Sasha, a unique story about a family's connection to skiing. "I was like, 'Are we allowed to say that?'" Sasha says. "It's direct and bold. Krystin is so good at that."

The filmmakers didn't need convincing. "At the time, we weren't sure if we were even going to be able to raise enough money to make the film, but we also knew we had to incorporate Sasha and Krystin's story," says Shannon Corsi, director of *Nexus*. "You don't see a lot of stories like theirs told. The way their moms passed on their care for their communities, the home they found in skiing and the way they passed that legacy on—it has this ripple effect."

Shannon appreciated that Sasha and Krystin followed separate routes to reach similar peaks. "They both have this shared goal of wanting to show up for their communities," she says.

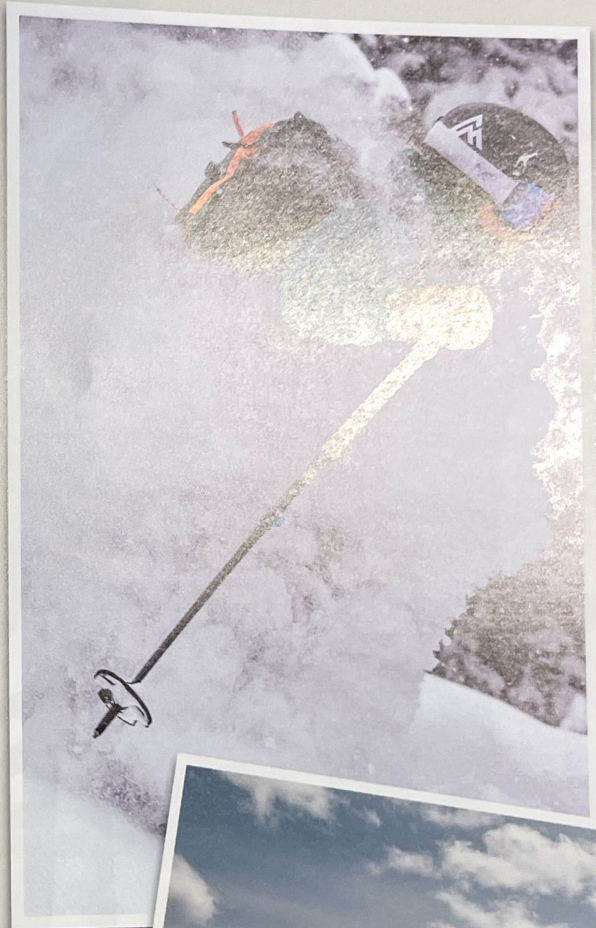
When you ask Liên and Cúc what they are most proud of when it comes to their daughters, they both pause, overcome with emotion. "My daughter has always known what she has wanted and has stuck to it. Determination is her strength," Liên says of Krystin. "She gives the gift of her time with direct help and care to her communities."

In ancient Greek, the name Sasha means "helper of mankind," and Cúc says that's exactly what her daughter is. "I always wanted women to have a voice," Cúc says. "When you love the outdoors, you take care of yourself, you take care of everybody else and you take care of the environment. That's why we introduced our kids to skiing."

As Cúc says this, Sasha is sitting in on our Zoom call, the two of them tiny, grainy boxes on a screen hundreds of miles apart, but very much on the same page. Sasha laughs, as if in awe, at her mom's response. She knows the mission statement of her own life's work is nearly identical—to reclaim health through a deep relationship with oneself, with others, and with the natural world.

"That's something you passed on to me, mama," Sasha responds. "You really did shape me, completely. Being different is a strength and you always modeled that for me. My family allowed me to be who I wanted to be." ❧

During a road trip through Utah last year, Krystin brews up some cold smoke on a particularly snowy day at Alta, UT.  
Photo: Eric Sales



Krystin poses with her mother Liên on Krystin's wedding day, April 17, 2022. Krystin and her husband Peter Brigham were married on snow in Southback at Crystal Mountain with their closest ski friends and parents present. Of course it was a bluebird powder day.  
Photo: Ryan French