

# Challenge By Choice

An Interview with Willie Ford, Chief Executive Officer, National Ability Center

**EDITORS' NOTE** Willie Ford serves as Chief Executive Officer of the National Ability Center, steering its mission to offer adaptive recreation for those with disabilities. His extensive background includes leading POC in North America and founding Givego, connecting over 1,500 experts with numerous brands. Formerly President at POC, Ford navigated its acquisition and sale, demonstrating significant leadership. His dedication extends to the nonprofit sector as Vice Chair of the High Fives Foundation and a board member at UNH Skiing. An NCAA All-American Ski Racer, Ford's leadership is marked by optimism and a commitment to impactful change.



Willie Ford

Our purpose is to enliven the human spirit, honoring each participant's unique abilities and potential. By creating inclusive environments and fostering personal growth, we aim to inspire confidence, build lasting skills, and transform lives. We believe that everyone, regardless of ability, deserves the chance to live a vibrant, active, and rewarding life.

**Will you discuss the National Ability Center's impact?**

The National Ability Center is turning 40 this fall. The history, impact, and legacy of the organization is remarkable. Since day one, NAC has focused on positively impacting the lives of people with disabilities. Through the legacy of NAC, thousands of individuals have been able to experience the thrills of outdoor recreation. NAC offers over 20 different programs including whitewater rafting, skiing, equestrian, biking, and so much more. No matter how difficult the adventure is, NAC has always

found a way to empower individuals of all abilities by building self-esteem, confidence, and lifetime skills through sport, recreation, and education.

**What interested you in becoming involved with National Ability Center?**

The impact. My family is passionate about outdoor recreation – we spend a lot of time in the mountains. The ability to help others do what we love is a dream. NAC is unique in that we bridge the gap between perceived limitations and what is possible. We call it “challenge by choice.” For instance, we offer weeklong rafting trips, we ski some of the most beautiful and intense mountains in the country, we have a herd of 12 horses and provide incredible equestrian training and facilitate equine assisted therapy. What we do at NAC is not easy, but it's important and impactful. We lead with “yes,” and we think creatively to find solutions to bring the same opportunities that we love to do to so many others who may not have been able to explore, adventure, and play the way we have.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The National Ability Center (NAC) provides world-class adaptive recreation and outdoor adventures for individuals, families and groups with varying physical, cognitive, and developmental disabilities. Rooted in Park City, Utah for nearly 40 years, with a satellite location in Moab, the NAC ([discovernac.org](http://discovernac.org)) empowers more than 5,500 competitive athletes, children, active-duty, veterans, and others yearly. Through on-campus and community-based programming, with individual and group activities, participants build self-esteem, confidence, and lifetime skills. The NAC hosts over 30,000 experiences and lessons each year including alpine and Nordic skiing, snowboarding, horseback riding, cycling, swimming, rafting, archery, among others. In 2023, the 9,400 square foot McGrath Mountain Center opened to serve the NAC's adaptive ski and snowboard programs, made possible by a historic 50-year land lease donated by Vail Resorts. With Vail's EpicPromise as the National Ability Center's largest annual community partner, the NAC is globally recognized as a leader in adaptive sports.

**How do you define the National Ability Center's mission and purpose?**

At the National Ability Center, our mission is to empower individuals of all abilities through adaptive sports, recreation, and adventure. We provide opportunities for those with disabilities and their families to experience the outdoors in ways that many once thought impossible.



Father biking with his son in NAC's annual Summit Challenge fundraising ride (top);  
Woman with above the knee amputation alpine skiing with NAC instructor (above)



### Will you provide an overview of the National Ability Center's work and programs?

The National Ability Center offers world-class adaptive recreation and education programs for individuals of all abilities. Our year-round programs include skiing, snowboarding, Nordic skiing, fat tire biking, snowshoeing, equestrian activities, indoor climbing, and pickleball in the winter. During the summer, we provide opportunities for cycling, mountain biking, indoor and outdoor climbing, water and paddle sports, archery, whitewater rafting, and more. Approximately 30 percent of our participants are service members, veterans, and their families. Another 30 percent are individuals with intellectual disabilities, and the remaining 40 percent includes those with various other disabilities, such as amputees, spinal cord injuries, cancer survivors, cerebral palsy, and individuals with rare and undiagnosed diseases.

Beyond our recreation programs, NAC is dedicated to promoting accessibility and inclusion in recreation and outdoor spaces through our educational initiatives. Recognized as the leading adaptive recreation organization in the United States, we serve individuals nationwide and make a global impact through our education and training programs.

### Will you highlight the National Ability Center's events?

The National Ability Center hosts five signature fundraising events throughout the year: Red, White & Snow in early March; Barn Party in early June; Summit Challenge at the end of August; MOFO in late September; and Saluting Our Heroes in October or November. Each event is unique, but all are designed to support the remarkable programs and participants at NAC. Our events range from high-end wine and culinary experiences to an equestrian-themed BBQ dinner and live auction. We host an 800-person cycling event and a 100-person day of mountain biking, culminating in a dinner honoring our service men and women. There's truly something for everyone at NAC.



*Youth participant laughing with NAC challenge course instructor*

These events wouldn't be possible without the incredible support of our corporate sponsors, the generous donors and community members who attend, and the hundreds of dedicated volunteers who help make each event a success.

### How valuable has it been to put together such an engaged and committed board of directors for the National Ability Center?

The value that the board of directors brings to NAC is remarkable. The board is engaged, energetic, and is one of our most important support systems. Each board member is involved

because they genuinely care about our mission and the impact we have on thousands of individuals annually. They contribute their unique experiences, providing us with a comprehensive range of resources in areas such as legal, finance, marketing, and operations.

### What are the priorities for the National Ability Center as you look to the future?

We are excited to be celebrating our 40th anniversary this fall. As we look to the future, NAC is focused on expanding our reach and enhancing our programs to better serve individuals of all abilities. Our priorities include increasing the accessibility and inclusivity of our programs, investing in state-of-the-art adaptive equipment, and extending our educational initiatives to promote greater understanding and support for adaptive recreation. Additionally, we want to broaden our impact through national and international partnerships, ensuring that more individuals can benefit from our programming.

However, achieving these ambitious goals requires significant funding. While we have made great strides, the continued support from donors and sponsors is essential to fulfilling our mission and meeting the growing needs of our community. With more than 40 percent of our participants coming from out-of-state and having served individuals and groups from 18 countries, we are poised to significantly increase our impact. With 40 million people – about twice the population of New York – in the U.S. living with a disability, we have an immense opportunity and responsibility to grow brand awareness, expand our programming, and extend our mission to more people both domestically and globally. ●



*Willie Ford engaging with a teen indoor climbing participant*