

What's in a Name? Marce Herz's Timeless Ideals and Enduring Spirit Stand Behind New Middle School



BY LOCAL RESIDENT, TODD L. TORVINEN

Marce Herz-The Chalkboard Biography

Who was Marcelle ("Marce") Herz? Why name a school after her? Her chalkboard biography: parent, world-class athlete, champion ski racer, WCSD teacher, journalist, community leader, entrepreneur and original artist and designer. To many, these might describe an accomplished life, but these accomplishments do not begin to express the force of her timeless ideals. They fail to chronicle how those ideals produced long-lasting impact on Northern Nevada youth, an impact which continues with vigor today, more than 56 years after her death in 1964.

Marce held the world record in the 440-yard dash, and the US record in the 800 m run. As amateur alpine ski racer, she held 16 championship titles. She taught our children at Mt Rose Elementary School. As a journalist for the Reno Evening Gazette (RGJ predecessor) she reported on skiing and winter sports, and authored a column known as the "Slalom Column." Later, she served the newspaper as the Winter Sports Editor. In the late 1950s/early 1960s, Marce, the artist began designing her own outdoor Christmas decorations. So impressive were the designs, they led to commissions from civic groups, and won prizes in California and Nevada for parade floats. Marce, the entrepreneur then founded her successful business, Marce Herz Designs.

Marce Herz-the Ideals, the Courage, and the Determination

Marce believed that all children deserved the opportunity to learn and grow. She fervently maintained that sports were good for everyone, but especially for children. Marce felt that sports played an integral role in developing and contributing to a child's academic performance.

Many stories chronicle Marce's determination and courage. However, two in particular highlight these attributes. First, in 1949, Marce won the Nevada State Ski Championship. Winning this championship required a participant to proficiently compete in the alpine disciplines of slalom and downhill. The downhill course started at the top of Slide Mountain and traveled down to nearly the valley floor, not far from Davis Creek State Park. This harrowing downhill, nearly 2 miles long demanded determination, courage and skill to compete (on inferior ski equipment). Marce's thoughts on the grit necessary to compete in downhill: "You've got to be cruel to run (race) downhill."

Marce passed in 1964 from cancer. The night before she died, she told her then 17-year-old son, Howard ("Howdy"): "Never be afraid of dying; only be afraid of not living." The quotes above likely show that Marce's great determination and courage derived from her love of skiing and competition, and her love for her family.

Marce Originates and Cofounds the Jr. Ski Program

No denying that skiing is an expensive sport and has always been such. That didn't stop Marce. No doubt forged by her



Marcelle Barkley in the late 40's at the Reno Ski Club



Alicia Herz, Marce's granddaughter and President of The Marce Herz Foundation

general beliefs about children and sports, Marce constructed a timeless and powerful ideal: "All children should get the opportunity to learn to ski." (And now snowboard).

Shortly after World War II, Marce founded the Fenway Preschool. As she fervently believed in sports for children, she began taking her students, including her son Howard, to Sky Tavern in her old woody station wagon where she taught them to ski.

This experience teaching her young Fenway Preschool children to ski led to the idea of a community program to teach children to ski, but affordable so nearly any family in Reno/Sparks could participate. The Jr. Ski Program commenced in 1948 with the first busload of kids transported to Sky Tavern for fun and ski lessons. However, that is simply a chalkboard fact.

Most all would agree that it is one thing to have an idea. It is entirely another to turn an idea with so many complexities into a concrete program. Marce, the determined entrepreneur, community leader, organizer, and yes-politician, went to work.

First, Marce approached the owner of Sky Tavern, Keston Ramsey with the idea for the program. She convinced him to say yes. He became a cofounder. She needed a lead instructor. She reached out to Hal Codding, an accomplished instructor and he agreed. He became a cofounder.

The program needed buses to transport the kids. She contacted at least two bus companies and convinced one to provide transportation at an affordable cost. She engaged local ski retailers and convinced them to provide new and used ski equipment to program participants at affordable prices. Finally, in order to keep the cost of the program low, Marce envisioned an all-volunteer instructor corps. She organized this all-volunteer force of instructors to teach the children.

Today, the Jr. Ski Program remains the oldest and largest all-volunteer ski program in the United States. To date, more than 100,000 children in this community learned to ski or snowboard on the Jr. Ski Program. Champions David Wise, Lane Spina, and Tamara McKinney started in the Junior Ski Program. The City of Reno recently approved a long-term lease for the Jr. Ski Program, so future generations may receive the same extraordinary benefit.

Marce's Ethos on Problem-Solving and Community Service Remain an Example to All

According to Marce's son, Howdy Herz, Marce remained modest about her accomplishments. She pursued goals because she believed in them - not for fame or money. If Marce observed a problem which needed solving, she just did it. If roadblocks arose, she found unique and creative ways around them. More than 70 years after its founding, the Jr. Ski Program continues to reflect her timeless ethos. Marce's life, ideals and enduring spirit continue to inspire kids and adults and compelled the Washoe County School District to name the new Arrowcreek Middle School after her.

Todd L. Torvinen is a local attorney and a third-generation Nevadan. Mr. Torvinen learned to ski on the Jr. Ski Program. In the late 1970s Mr. Torvinen was a junior alpine ski racer and the last person to compete in Far West Ski Association's Marce Herz Downhill where he crashed and spent a week at Renown (formerly Washoe Medical Center). Todd is a Marce Herz Foundation Board Member.

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