

First of all I'd like to thank the board of the Vermont Tourism Summit and in particular Sarah Wojcik of Ski Vermont for inviting me to speak today.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

As Ronda mentioned, I'm a writer who has covered family travel for almost fifteen years. In addition to writing *The Family Traveler's Handbook* and publishing in outlets ranging from BBC Travel to MapQuest I've been publishing stories on my blog The Mother of all Trips since 2008. I've traveled with my kids to France, Italy, and England and all over the U.S. In the summer of 2016 I took a 2000-mile solo road trip with my two sons Tommy, who is 14 and Teddy, who is 12. We drove from Delaware to Wisconsin and back in a large loop that took us through West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Niagara, Canada. My kids have hiked in Acadia, taken a secret tour of the Doge's Palace in Venice, kayaked with manatees in Florida, caught crabs in the Chesapeake Bay and swum in Lac Lemman in Switzerland.

I've also written for the Ski Vermont All Mountain Mamas blog since its inception in 2012. That's largely because in spite of all this travel to other places, Vermont occupies a very special spot in my family's collective imagination. We spend at least five weeks a year here, including a minimum of two every summer. Coming here in August and at Christmas are pretty non-negotiable according to my kids - one of whom has a large framed map of Mad River Glen hanging over his bed. My younger son has an oil painting of Waitsfield's covered bridge on the wall in his room.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

I have a pretty unique perspective on Vermont - not just as someone who has lived in and out of the state but also as someone who has seen the hospitality industry here from the inside and the outside. I've waited tables here and eaten at many of the state's best restaurants. I learned to ski at Mad River Glen as a child and I've worked to promote the statewide ski industry as a writer and social media influencer. Even though I've lived in Delaware for 20 years, Vermont feels like home to me and my husband Matt and we have plans to retire here when that time comes.

I believe that the reason I am speaking to you today is in my capacity not as a fan of Vermont or as someone who knows all the ins and outs of its tourism industry but as a storyteller. Stories have always been a key part of my brand as a blogger and a writer. I am, in fact, someone who believes very deeply in the power of stories, especially when it comes to travel.

We all seek to make stories when we travel - stories are what we will remember years after we've been to a place. Stories are what shape us and they are what we share on social media and when we talk to friends about our trips. They are how we find a way back to places we have visited and loved. I would argue that the surest way to build loyalty and repeat customers is by giving people the chance to make their own stories. It's like handing them a return ticket.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

As I hope my talk today will show, Vermont is especially suited to storytelling. That's because people come here for meaningful, authentic experiences. The stories I will share will touch on a range of experiences from the sublime (alpine skiing) to the mundane (maple creemees). I will also offer some practical suggestions for how you can use the power of storytelling to share the past, illuminate the present, and shape Vermont tourism's future.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

I'll start in November of 1979. My father and my stepmother, Thom and Joan, left their publishing jobs in Manhattan for the Millbrook Inn in Waitsfield, exchanging suits and the Upper West Side for flannel shirts and plumbing problems.

Neither of them had any experience in the hospitality industry. They didn't know how to downhill ski. With the exception of her time in college, Joan had never lived anywhere other than New York and my father, who at least had the New England cred of being born in Maine had not ever spent time in Vermont before they started looking for an inn to buy. So to say they were inexperienced outsiders is something of an understatement. But they brought a lot of enthusiasm to their new life and experienced an almost immediate visceral love for the Mad River Valley. My father once told me that after one drive on the Waitsfield Common Road, with its sweeping views of the Green Mountains, they knew that they were home. So they

made an offer to buy the small blue inn, which at the time had six guest rooms, only one of them with a private bath.

Now, I'm not sure if any of you remember what happened, or rather, what didn't happen, during the winter of 1979 to 1980. It didn't snow. The weather was so warm and dry that ski areas in the state saw a 34 percent drop in visits. It was catastrophic and in fact was one of the weather events that led so many ski resorts to implement snowmaking. (I'll note here that the only winter since then that's been worse for snow was the winter of 2015-16.)

My parents, who had borrowed money from everyone they knew to buy the Millbrook, watched in horror as their guest rooms sat empty all winter. When my sister and I arrived for a months-long visit at the beginning of the summer of 1980, things had gotten pretty dire and my parents weren't sure their business would be able to survive. So they did the only logical thing to be done under the circumstances:

They opened a restaurant.

I remember Joan, who in addition to lacking any hospitality experience had never sewed anything in her life, hemming tablecloth after tablecloth on a second-hand sewing machine. My father, who was no gardener, tilled a huge patch of the large backyard and he and Joan planted beans and lettuce. The kitchen in the inn was not commercial but my father set up a prep station off to one side and he and Joan scoured auctions for the pots and pans and other equipment they needed. The inn had only one small dining room so they removed all the furniture from one of the front sitting rooms and put in four small tables, bringing the grand total of

covers up to about 24 if every single chair they owned (some of them rescued from the barn across the street) was full.

And of course, there was the issue of the menu. My father would be the chef while Joan would do the baking and run the front of the house. But what kind of food should they serve? At that time in central Vermont there weren't a lot of dining options - the field was wide open. So again my father made the obvious and logical choice.

He would cook Indian food.

A veteran of the Peace Corps, who spent two years in the late 1960s in India, my father had a long fascination with this cuisine. And when he created his menu that he would supply from his newly planted garden, he decided that Indian food, including a spicy vegetarian Thali plate, would be on the menu. As would be hand-rolled pasta - since we don't have a drop of Italian blood in my family I'm not sure where that one came from - and to keep things at least a little bit tied to New England, homemade molasses and cornmeal Anadama bread.

This of course was decades before anyone used the terms "farm-to-table" or "locavore". World cuisine wasn't really a term that was tossed around either. I'm not sure that my parents had much of a plan, but they had a lot of energy and were fueled, as so many Vermonters often are - as I'm sure many of you have been, by necessity. My sister and I washed dishes and helped to weed the garden. We poured coffee and water and watched my father make order after order of bananas Foster (a logical dessert choice don't you think?). Sometimes he would run out of lettuce in the middle of dinner service and would stride out to the backyard to pick some,

greeting arriving customers with a wave. When my parents realized that people loved to see him out there, he started doing it on purpose.

The restaurant was immediately successful - and bear in mind please that this was before the days when social media generated instantaneous buzz. It was popular via simple, old-fashioned word of mouth. Popular because my father knew he had a good story to tell - that what Vermont was missing was Indian food cooked by a white guy from Maine. Popular because the people who came to eat there went home and told the story of having done so.

And so it was that my father and Joan discovered their true calling. Although they always operated the inn, the restaurant was their real love and the source of joy and creativity in their lives. Over time they added guest rooms and bathrooms, created a dedicated dining space and added another stove and a hood and a walk-in cooler to the kitchen. But they never expanded beyond seven tables and they did most of the work - the unending, relentless work - themselves with occasional help from me and my sister or local high school kids during our school holidays.

Lots of things changed over the 30 years that my father and stepmother ran their restaurant. As they grew more successful, they were able to indulge their love of travel. Every spring and fall they closed down the restaurant and left, seeking adventure on six continents. Their travels became a key part of their brand as they added dishes and bottles of wine to the menu from the places they visited and hosted special travel-themed wine dinners. My father even started teaching people how to cook Indian food as part of the annual Vermont Festival of the Arts.

And of course, the supply chain in Vermont changed utterly, giving them access to local produce and other food products. In the mid 1990s the Vermont Fresh Network began with the express intent of starting local farmers markets like the one in Waitsfield that my father loved and connecting local providers with chefs like him. Increased supply meant, much to the relief of my entire family none of whom ever enjoyed weeding, that my parents could plant grass where the garden once was, using the yard for weddings and other parties. I myself got married right about where that lettuce used to grow.

But here is something that has stayed the same, and it was the secret of my parents' success, of the success of all the other small businesses in Vermont, and, I would argue, will continue to be the key to success moving forward: my parents stayed both true to themselves and to the place that they lived and they figured out how to communicate that story to the thousands of people who crossed their doorstep. They recognized instinctively that Vermont is unique in terms of its terroir and its food products and so they used everything they could find around them and applied the filter of their own experiences to create something that you literally could not find anywhere else. I know this for a fact because the restaurant closed when my father died in 2010 and I've longed many times for its return.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

Of course, my parents' Vermont story may be distinctive but it isn't singular. As this slide shows there are so many other restaurants, breweries, distilleries,

orchards, bakeries, maple syrup producers, farms, corn mazes, art galleries, photographers toy producers, bookstores and garden shops here in Vermont, each with a story as individual as the one I've just shared. The creativity in this small state is overwhelming and the power of story is evident everywhere.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

Anne and Joe Tisbert bought Valley Dream Farm in Cambridge in 1992 and ran it as a dairy farm before facing a series of struggles caused by falling milk prices and a rare tumor that took their son's speech, sight and movement for months. The family managed to pivot, shifting to organically grown produce sold from a farmstand, to local restaurants, and as CSA shares. In 2012 Anne saw the opportunity in the local food movement and started serving meals prepared by local chefs on the front porch of the barn.

I remember seeing George Schenk carefully collecting stones in the Mad River in the 1980s when I would swim in the summer as a kid. After building an oven at Tucker Hill Lodge and cooking outside for a few years, he built a bakery at Lareau Farm, which was the beginning of his American Flatbread empire. George quite literally told stories for many years in the form of written dedications. Each of his restaurants is a complete expression of his belief in the importance of food as fundamental to human health and well-being.

The aptly named Next Chapter Bookstore in Barre is run by former first-grade teacher Cynthia Duprey. She took over the business when her home was



flooded in 2011 and she could no longer run an in-home daycare. Cynthia had always wanted to run a bookstore and she used that opportunity to change her career.

And these are just a few examples. As we look at these myriad businesses, each unique, each truly part of the story of Vermont in its own way it makes me think that we should be continually striving to understand these individual businesses like they are panels on a quilt that makes up Vermont's diverse brand. Do the people who own them have to work hard pretty much all the time? You bet. Do they have obstacles to overcome in the form of mid-week doldrums and weather? Uh huh. Do they always know just where they are headed? No. But they are doing something meaningful and they've found an effective way to explain how.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

But of course, there's another side to the stories as well, isn't there? There's the customer experience. In 2015 Vermont had 3 million occupied hotel room nights over the course of the calendar year. While I don't know if that adds up to 3 million interesting stories, I'm willing to gamble that one or two of them were. The question is, how many of these stories will bring people back or get them to share what happened here with friends or family? For stories to be a valuable tourism tool they have to develop connections, bring people back, ideally even become multigenerational.

I'm going to tell you about my first ski experience in Vermont and how that ultimately led the members of my family to deepen both each of their individual and collective Vermont bond.

It didn't take my father and Joan long to get on the downhill skiing bandwagon. Most of their wintertime guests skied at Mad River Glen and so they did too. I had my first lesson there at 11, a memory that involves a lot of snow. I ended up with clumps of it sticking to my pom-pom hat, inside my mittens and the bottom of my ski pants, scattered across my jacket and sadly, on my goggles and up my nose.

What was sad is that this snow wasn't falling from the sky. It coated my body because I spent most of my time on that first ski run on the ground with my skis and poles tangled hopelessly or, on some occasions, ten feet behind or ahead of me. In fact, I fell getting off the lift and things didn't improve from there.

In those days lessons at Mad River Glen meant meeting your instructor at the the base lodge and then riding up the Sunnyside Double Chair, the top of which is 1500 vertical feet from the bottom. I still remember how I watched nervously as skiers swooped underneath the chair and in the trees off to the sides. The ramp to get off the lift itself is steep and I balked at the last minute, which meant a tumble and the humiliation of having the lift stop.

My teacher was a no-nonsense woman named Leigh Clark who still teaches at Mad River as she has for the past 40 years. She was kind, but firm, and had no patience for any drama, focusing insistently on my form and balance. Every time I fell down she waited for me to get up and dust myself off, but then resumed telling

me what I needed to do with my legs and arms. And so it was that eventually, finally, Leigh got me from the top of the mountain to the middle, where the mid-mountain Birdland Chair offered the relief of serving shorter, smoother groomed runs meant for beginners.

By the end of that first lesson, I was confident enough to once again ride the double chairlift up to the top and pick my way cautiously down, this time remaining primarily upright. I'll never forget how great it felt to successfully dismount the lift and nonchalantly (or so it seemed to me) loop my poles around my wrists before crouching in my snowplow and pointing my skis down the hill. From that day on I was a skier and actually experienced a mini-version of the ski bum lifestyle during all my high school vacations when I would see how many runs I could fit in before I had to go back to the inn and help in the dining room. I even went to college 45 minutes from Mad River, although I won't claim that skiing was the only reason I did so. I had a great skiing story!

Yet I'm sorry to say that for many years I represented just the type of skier that those of you who work on the marketing side of the industry despair of. I went to graduate school in Pennsylvania, met a flatlander from Wisconsin, fell in love, moved from there to Delaware, worked and had children. While I was often in Vermont to see my father and Joan, for nearly twenty years I didn't ski once. I didn't completely forget the story of skiing at Mad River Glen, but I tucked it in the back of my brain and didn't reflect on it too much.

**SWITCH SLIDE**

But then my father was diagnosed with colon cancer. And I realized that maybe he would never ski with my sons Tommy and Teddy who in that January of 2010 were 7 and 3. There was something about the realization that he might not have much more skiing left that made me tell my husband Matt that the time had come to get back on the mountain and get our kids on skis. I also told him that I thought that he should learn too, despite the fact that he was 43 and had never once in his life put on a pair of downhill skis.

So I brought my entire family to Mad River Glen, where the lesson philosophy had changed over the years, even if it was still Leigh who greeted us when we came to the Ski School Desk (in fact, I once again took a lesson with her to get my ski legs back - 30 years later I didn't fall down once).

There was now a small rope tow at the bottom for beginners to practice and that's where all three of them started. Teddy was not enthusiastic and spent most of his time lounging at the bottom of the hill sucking on his mitten. At the end of his second day of lessons he was, as I like to put it, "sent to ski school juvie" when we were told that he couldn't participate in group lessons but needed a private instructor. We decided to mostly let him hang out in the daycare - where he could dress up in an Elmo suit and watch *Finding Nemo*. It wasn't until the following winter when we took a trip to Smuggler's Notch with its immersive kids program that he learned to ski - and did so with utter enthusiasm, if not attention to detail. He still makes me nervous the way he just points his skis downhill and goes.

Tommy was totally different. Although he was only 7, he was disgusted that he didn't get to ride the chairlift to the top on his first run. When he was told that he had to be able to make it through each of the gates, demonstrating his ability to turn, before he could ride the chairlift, he set about doing so with marked determination and care and by the second day was riding up to the top.

And Matt? He discovered that skiing is just as much fun when you learn in your 40s. His favorite thing is a long blue run without too many bumps and I'm so happy to have handed him this gift in adulthood.

You can see that even though we were at the same place we each had our own unique story of it. And almost magically, these individual stories became a shared family narrative too. Before I really knew what had happened, we became a family who willingly left after school on Fridays and drove sometimes for as long as 8 hours for a weekend of skiing in Vermont. This winter Tommy is 14 and his skiing skills have officially surpassed mine as he demonstrated repeatedly in February on Mad River's Fall Line. Skiing in Vermont has become a core part of his identity, something he talks about constantly. He obsessively follows the ski areas he's visited on Instagram and skiing is also a major aspect of the story that he tells about himself there as well.

Since I started writing for the Ski Vermont All Mountain Mamas website I've had the good fortune to ski at 13 of the 22 alpine ski areas in Vermont. And what I've experienced tells a story of an industry that is constantly striving to adapt to the many challenges it faces including tough demographics and a changing climate. It's an industry that must constantly look back and provide people with the kinds of

nostalgic experiences they remember from their childhood while at the same time finding ways to improve it so that they bring in new customers willing to try something that they perceive as expensive and maybe even a little bit scary.

It has to make sure that people leave telling themselves good stories, stories that make them want to come back. These stories will all be different - for some people it will be about skiing through the trees. For others it will be fast runs on steep groomed trails. For still others, it will be discovering that while they don't want to learn to downhill ski, they love ice skating or tubing or Nordic skiing and then rejoining their family for dinner.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

Win Smith of Sugarbush Resort knows the power of a good story - he's always out on the mountain, asking people to share theirs with him, finding out how their day is going. He also shares his own stories in the enewsletter he sends out regularly.

Okemo and Stratton both give women a chance to focus on improving their skills while making new friends and learning just what they are capable of on skis with their women-only clinics - I personally have some great stories from participating.

Magic Mountain has new ownership and is working to improve their snowmaking and lift services so that they can extend their season and shorten lines, while at the same time keeping a cap on the number of people who are on the

mountain at one time so that people keep the precious experience of skiing uncrowded trails.

I know that in my family's case, our own skiing stories are what get us into the car and driving through those long winter nights for the chance to ski, even when the conditions aren't great, even though it's quite a haul from Delaware. And I know also that this is true for so many other families who come here to ski. I remember one time being at the top of Mount Ellen and eavesdropping on a man who had just gotten off the lift with his two school-age children. He had stopped to do the same thing I had done, which was admire the view of the ridgeline, the snow-covered trees, and the valley spread out below us. "Look at that," he cried to his children gesturing widely with his poles. "Look at that view! Vermont is so beautiful! We are so lucky that we get to come here! Look, look, look!" I like to think of those two kids telling their children someday just how much their dad loved Vermont.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

My third and final story is really more of an extended metaphor. I want to talk about how creemees represent the state of Vermont.

Why? I believe that creemees are one of the things that tell a story of the whole state, of the people who live here and of the people who come to visit. I of course have my own creemee stories. Back in the early days of my parents' business when they were utterly broke, there was always a little bit of money somehow to

buy creemees at the stand in Bristol after a long day of swimming in the falls. My husband may hail from the "other" dairy state (Wisconsin) but even he will admit that maple creemees are the only kind of soft-serve ice cream one should eat.

Like everyone here, my family has our favorite place to get creemees. The Morse Farm outside of Montpelier has, in our opinion, the best tasting maple creemees in Vermont. (And yes, I'm aware those are fightin' words.) Canteen Creme Company, which opened in downtown Waitsfield in the summer of 2016, has an off-the-hook maple creemee that's topped with maple cotton candy. But our sentimental favorite is Maynard's, just outside Waitsfield on Route 100B, it is a place of summer happiness and all that is good and right about childhood (and come to think of it, adulthood). There isn't much to the place – it is a renovated chicken coop, painted red and perched on a rise in the road. You can buy a burger topped with tomatoes from the large adjoining garden, a lobster roll, a fresh raspberry sundae, and of course, creemees: vanilla, chocolate, twist, and maple.

When I think about Maynard's, it's not just the ice cream I remember of course. I think of the time that six-year-old Tommy finished his, and climbed the tree that sits in among the picnic tables in front of the stand. He had a paper crown on his head that Matt had found by the river in Stowe on a family outing, and he looked for all the world like a fairy tale prince surveying his domain. I remember Teddy and Matt playing tug-of-war over the dregs of Matt's cone, and wiping sticky fingers before we all piled into the car. I remember the joy of heading home in the soft evening air, all the windows open, the mountains around us.



What if you had a customer who told you that they really loved creemees and wanted to do a state-wide tour to visit as many creemee stands as possible. What kind of story would you be able to tell them? Would you be able to help them find their way? Do you ever look holistically at the place you live and work and think about how you can help to shape the story we tell the outside world about it? Creemees are just one small relatively inexpensive, democratic thing that make Vermont special and yet an entire story of the place can be spun from them. What other opportunities like that are out there?

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

I hope that you've enjoyed some of the Vermont stories I have shared here. In closing, I'd like to offer a three-part challenge to each of you that I hope will get you thinking about the way that stories can help shape your brand and your business.

The first challenge is for you to reflect on, to know and to share your own stories. I know you are all busy, but this is important. Because when you tell your own story it's a way to identify your niche, the thing that sets you apart from everyone else. And don't forget that your story is organic - it's something that comes naturally from who you are. It is also self-perpetuating. It's one of the few free things that you own just by virtue of being who you are and doing what you do. And everyone has a story, from the smallest of family-run businesses to the largest ski resort in the state.

The second is to take time to talk to the people who come to you from other places so you can find ways to offer them the best visitor experience - and help them shape the Vermont stories that they will go home and share. What is it that your customers love about Vermont? And what do you know about what they love that can help you make your own business better or indicate what the best routes for collaboration are? This is more relevant than ever, because according to Google, 85 percent of leisure travelers decide on activities only after they arrive at their destination. And 67 percent of them report feeling more loyal to travel providers who share information that improves their travel experience.

My third tip is to start paying attention to the stories in your own community and from around the state and look for ways that you can start sharing them and maybe even collaborate in doing so. Where can you come together to help people create the best narrative of their visit here that they will take home and share with their families and friends?

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

Where and how you do this is up to you of course, but I would argue that technology should be a key aspect of your storytelling. You can use technology to tell your own story through social media, online videos, article placement on relevant blogs or websites or on your own blog. You might also send out an e-newsletter full of your own musings, stories, recipes, photos - you name it.

And you can use different platforms simultaneously to tell your story. I've included a picture on this slide of my Back to Ski Pinterest board. This is an example of a skiing storytelling campaign that I ran for three ski seasons between 2012 and 2014. I and other bloggers shared stories on our own sites, on a dedicated Back to Ski site, and on Pinterest, Facebook and Twitter using the #backtoski hashtag. All of the content was branded with the same idea - that of getting "back to ski" in the fall when there are deals available. I was able to amplify the message by using a variety of different channels to share it. In 2014 it had over 10 million Twitter impressions, reached 14,000 people on Facebook and had 260,000 blog page views when the various sites where content was posted tallied their numbers.

## **SWITCH SLIDE**

These same media give you the chance to interact with your own customers and find out what they like via user statistics, comments or surveys. Not only that, but if you have an online presence you can encourage your customers to share stories that tag you on their social media accounts. According to the U.S. Travel Association just under 60 percent of leisure travelers use social media while they are on the road. Why not make it easy for your business to be part of their story?

Technology also offers the opportunity for you to engage in meaningful collaboration. Why not work with your community to create a powerful hashtag that you all employ on Twitter? How about you create an online photo contest for your

town or ski resort? Or maybe you could work with other towns across the state to make a cool Big Vermont Creemee interactive map or infographic.

Are these things time consuming? Yes. Do you have to do all the things and do them all in some perfect way? No. But what you can do is make the decision to dedicate some amount of time - whether it's ten minutes a day or two hours a week - to some aspect of sharing your story.

### **SWITCH SLIDE**

This slide offers a few examples of research campaigns and blogs that you can turn to as examples and resources. And the happy news is that this conference is full of sessions that will give you nitty gritty information about creating a marketing strategy or blogging on a very tight budget of both time and money.

### **SWITCH SLIDE**

There are a million pieces of Vermont that I haven't touched on in this talk, a million untold stories: The joy of swimming in rivers and lakes. The artisans who make everything from sculpture to photographs to pottery. The music that fills the mountains during concerts and weddings. The triathlons, the kayaking and canoeing, the camping. The Revolutionary War history. The festivals and farmers markets. The sun dropping behind the Adirondacks and illuminating the Green Mountains night after night at every season of the year. Vermont offers us as many

stories as there are stars in its clear skies. I hope you can find the best way to share yours. Thank you.

**SWITCH SLIDE**