

U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship
“The Great Outdoors: Small Businesses and America’s Outdoor Recreation Economy”



Senator Shaheen and members of the Committee, it is an honor to be here and tell my story of the Outdoor Recreation Economy in my industry and represent our region in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you all what I’ve experienced as a small business owner in hopes of helping inform and give opportunities to others.

I grew up in Conway, New Hampshire, a small town of 10,000 residents that thrives on tourism. Every summer, visitors come to experience our region through recreational activities like hiking, biking, canoeing, and skiing. My family moved here from Portland, Maine introduced me to our mountains specifically through hiking and skiing. Outdoor recreation is a cornerstone of my community. It is how I’ve made the most important connections with people in my life, maintained my mental and physical well-being, and it provides work for so many of the local and regional businesses. I currently own an outdoor gear shop in Jackson, New Hampshire and host ski and trail running events in the region.

My story really begins in 2014 when I moved back to Conway to be closer to my family and the mountains I grew up in. My friend from high school was starting a fish fertilizer business and needed help. This business ultimately failed but it was my introduction to entrepreneurship and realized I preferred working for myself. As that chapter closed, another one opened. A friend in the ski industry convinced me to open up an account with the company he worked for and sell ski gear. I decided to take his advice and found myself filling out all the paperwork required to become a backcountry ski dealer. With that application, I was now a small business owner of *Ski The Whites*, a backcountry ski store. For those of you who are not familiar with the activity of Backcountry Skiing, it’s much like alpine skiing but without the chairlifts; you use specialized ski equipment to climb up much like nordic skiing, and lock your heels in to alpine ski back down.

The first year in business I might have sold eight or nine items. I had no brick and mortar store, no marketing, and no guidance. With skis loaded in the back of my truck, I would meet customers in parking lots and sell or rent gear that I thought was best suited for skiing in our mountains. The following year, I found a small 200 square foot space for rent in a ski lodge. This would prove to be all I needed to move things forward with my business. With increased foot traffic and a venue to host events, an outdoor community started to form around my business. The backcountry ski category was growing; I had helped start a non-profit to organize and promote the sport in New Hampshire and Western Maine, and I was also spending my free time in the mountains, sharing photos and videos from my adventures. This last piece was critical - sharing media directly affects the way people in this region think about the outdoors and what's accessible in the backyard. They don't need to book a flight for a big mountain experience, it's right here, a day trip away.

After a few years working out of this small space, I realized there was a need for a year-round specialized outdoor gear shop. Making this next jump proved to be the most challenging. In order to grow my business I needed to move into a commercial space with better visibility and offer services that expanded outside of backcountry skiing. I found an old art gallery that was for sale and was exactly what I was looking for. It was an ideal space and location for the growth of my business but out of my price range. A traditional mortgage on the building exceeded my savings. With the guidance of my friend, I learned about the SBA 504 Loan Program which lowered the down payment and made the financing possible.

During the closing process, the pandemic had arrived, causing additional anxiety around this purchase. What was the future of outdoor recreation? How were trail closures in the White Mountain National Forest going to affect customer visits? Were customers going to have the discretionary income to spend money in our industry? Was the industry going to be able to supply products to meet the demand? Was this business truly viable? The following summer and winter answered all my concerns and it was evident that the outdoor community was growing in all three sectors I was focusing on: skiing, biking, and trail running.

Our sales grew that summer and for the first time I was able to hire staff. Job creation was a critical part of the 504 Loan Program: over the past three years I've added three full-time and four part-time employees. We now host eight unique outdoor events that attract participants from all over the country and highlight our outdoor recreational opportunities. We continue to work with non-profit organizations that align with our mission to promote the outdoors and build community.

However, we face adversity like many other small businesses. A poor snow year decreases the number of customer visits significantly (coined 'the backyard effect'). If a city like Boston or New York doesn't receive normal snowfall or experience a winter-like climate, they are less likely to recreate in winter activities. This means that as our winters get shorter on either end of the season due to climate change, there's an impact greater than what we experience locally. During weekends with inclement weather, our sales decrease by fifty percent. This summer was the wettest summer on record, with many of the rain events occurring on the weekends. This

affected gear rentals and we had a spike in rental cancellations and significantly less day-of rentals.

This year marks the start of my eighth year in business. Without the growth of the outdoor recreation economy and the support of the SBA 504 loan program I would not be where I am now.

Thank you for your time.