

Guest services No. 1 priority for Northstar chief



Beth Howard took over the top leadership position at Northstar just before the ski season started. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – Having all the equipment one needs for whatever work conditions might come up isn't unusual for a boss. What's different about this office is the tools are four pairs of skis.

"I'm ready for any type of condition," Beth Howard says.

But she doesn't always put on her gray uniform when she hits the slopes – that would be a giveaway to employees that upper management is around. As vice president and general manager of Northstar ski resort, she wants to be able to check on things

incognito. This allows her to experience things as the guest does.

Howard is on the mountain at least four days a week, every Saturday and all holidays. The 51-year-old assumed the top position at Northstar this fall. She took over for Bill Rock who is now at Park City.

“Beth was chosen for this position because she has strong leadership skills, deep business knowledge and an ability to get things done. In her career at Vail Resorts she has had great success overseeing our entire food and beverage operation for all of our mountain resorts driving a strong financial performance, delivering a high quality product and service and has been instrumental in developing and putting in place many innovative programs, products and approaches,” Blaise Carrig, president of Vail Resorts Mountain Division, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “She easily works her way through difficult challenges with a very positive and can do approach. And she has consistently demonstrated an ability to lead other strong leaders and foster teamwork.”

Since 2010, she was vice president of mountain dining and clubs for Vail Resorts, the parent company of the ski resort. That job had her overseeing the dining operations at the company’s more than 100 restaurants and eight private mountain and golf clubs.

“This job is much more hands on,” Howard said while sitting in her spacious office in the heart of Northstar Village.

The corporate gig was much more removed from the day-to-day operations, while this job has her interacting more with guests. And it is guest services that Howard plans to focus on.



The 42-year-old ski resort has more than 2,400 acres of skiable terrain.

“I’d like to see Northstar as the best in guest services in the industry,” Howard told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We can always be better. We are fine-tuning how we can execute our guest services.”

She is taking note of every component of guest services – from the interaction with bus drivers on trips to and from the parking lot, to lifties, to food quality, to what the resort looks like. No detail is too small for her to pay attention to when it comes to guest services.

Howard doesn’t want Northstar to be compared to other resorts. Often it is referred to as the Beaver Creek of California. She wants Northstar to stand on its own.

But she is intimately familiar with the inner workings of Beaver Creek because she was in charge of that Colorado resort’s mountain dining from 1993-2008.



Summer operations, like the bike park, are also Beth Howard's responsibility.

Howard doesn't let it faze her that she is in a male-dominated profession; it's not something she has focused on and clearly not something that has held her back. She's been in the ski business for 30 years.

It is men who founded most U.S. ski resorts and subsequently hired other men to operate them. Many of them came out of the 10th Mountain Division after World War II. Slowly hiring practices have changed, but a woman in a ski management position is still rare.

"I think that now it is not an industry bias but more reflective on the culture of individual resorts and resort companies – whether they are supportive of women in these roles and also create and foster workplaces that are unbiased and gender neutral," Carrig said. "This has been an ongoing focus at Vail Resorts, where we have two woman running very large resorts (Northstar and Breckenridge), two woman are directors of mountain operations (Vail and Canyons), two women ski patrol directors (Vail and Beaver Creek). And, my successor for president of the Mountain Division is Pat Campbell, which will put a woman at the helm of the largest ski operation in the North America, if not the world."

But a career in the ski business is not what Howard dreamed of as a farm girl in Iowa. In many ways it's a fluke she ended up in Colorado for the last three decades.

She was attending the University of Northern Iowa when she saw a posting for an internship with Vail Associates – the predecessor to Vail Resorts. This was 1985. The business major wrote to the Colorado-based company requesting a six-week internship. She had never heard of the company until then.

"When I saw Colorado and those mountains I knew that's where I wanted to be," Howard said.

Until this fall, she had never left.

For now, her husband and son are still in Colorado. They will be moving to Truckee when the school year is over.

"I'm living my dream," Howard said of her new job, new town and new mountain.