

“Sidecountry”: RATED R

By: Doug Chabot

R: RESTRICTED. Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.

An R-rated film includes “...adult themes, adult activity, hard language, intense or persistent violence or other elements, so that parents are counseled to take this rating very seriously.” Sidecountry is more serious than the most serious film because people of all ages can die in the sidecountry, especially youth that lack adult supervision or perspective. A young adult sneaking into a theater might face consequences if caught, but heading out-of-bounds of a ski area into the sidecountry is an entirely different level of risk. Sidecountry is the term we give backcountry that is accessed from and adjacent to a ski area. Just like a trailhead never closes, so is access into the sidecountry from a ski area. Sidecountry is rated R because it contains the adult themes of death and intense and persistent violence in the form of avalanches. Parents and their children alike need to take these risks seriously.

Parents are hard-wired to protect their kids. The good ones give curfews, set bed times, ask about friends, know where they are going and with whom, set parental internet controls, teach sex ed, discuss social media, meet teachers and do whatever it takes to guide their children safely toward independence. But after a parent waves goodbye in the ski area parking lot do they know what the kids are doing? Are they leaving the ski area for R-rated terrain?

Kids are kids. They are hard-wired to push boundaries, seek freedom and crash through parental guardrails. Skiing is freedom. Every ski area includes a safety net of ski patrollers trained to rescue, give advice, administer first aid and make slopes safe from avalanches.

They are mountain lifeguards and parents drop off their kids knowing they are safe to get a taste of independence with ski patrol help close by. What parents might not realize is that as soon as their kid goes out-of-bounds into the sidecountry the safety net falls away and he’s on his own in R-rated terrain. The ski patrol does not patrol the sidecountry.

Many parents have no idea that their kid regularly leaves the ski area boundaries and heads into harm’s way with no adult supervision. Moms are shocked when they learn the boundary gate is open to the sidecountry whenever lifts are operating, no matter the avalanche danger. There is no third party protecting someone from exiting the ski area. The decision is theirs. Bravado in youth is normal and some kids brag at school about skiing steep sidecountry slopes when the avalanche danger was high. Some kids don’t have beacons and some have no avalanche knowledge. Most have no ability to assess



the snow and lack training to avoid avalanches or save the life of a friend who is buried in one. The decision to ski a slope requires maturity, self-awareness and hard skills. Many adults lack these qualities. Can kids safely ski in avalanche terrain? Sure. Some young adults are extraordinary: a 16 year old recently sailed around the world solo, others lead difficult ice and rock climbs, and some kayak Class V. Maybe your kid fits into this exceptional mold, but probably not.

Sex education for kids at a certain age is essential, and so is avalanche education and equipment for those who go out of bounds. If kids are heading into the sidecountry with friends it's a parent's job to talk to them about how serious it is and make sure they have proper gear and a field-based avalanche class before they go. PARENT'S: Know where your children are going, who they are going with and if they know enough to save your kid's life if something goes wrong. As mentioned, sidecountry is Rated R and going there is a heady responsibility with potentially disastrous consequences.