

# LINCOLN HILLS: 20TH CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN OASIS TO 21ST CENTURY ROCKY MOUNTAIN RETREAT

By Jennifer Turner

In 1922, African American Denverites E.C. Regnier and Roger Ewalt made history when they formed the Lincoln Hills Development Company. Their goal was to build a resort (named Lincoln Hills) for middle-class African Americans in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. At the time of its founding, Lincoln Hills was the only vacation retreat west of the Mississippi River owned by and catering to African Americans. Almost 100 years later, the Lincoln Hills property, located on South Boulder Creek in Blackhawk, now serves another important purpose. It is the backdrop for Lincoln Hills Cares (LHC), a charity that provides unforgettable mountain experiences for underprivileged youth, their families and veterans.

The original Lincoln Hills resort encompassed over 100 acres, and in the 1920s and 1930s, more than 600 lots were sold. Most were small and only 25 feet x 100 feet, and cost \$56 to \$100. Cabins were typically erected on the lots, or they were used as campsites. The owners came from across the United States, but the vast majority hailed from Denver's African American community.

At the time, Denver had the largest African American population in Colorado. While there were no Jim Crow laws, black citizens still encountered widespread discrimination. Housing and employment opportunities were scarce, and many of Denver's schools and parks were segregated. In 1932, a group of African Americans attempted to swim in Washington Park. White residents armed with sticks and rocks accosted them and when the police arrested ten of the swimmers, a riot ensued.

The Ku Klux Klan was also a major influence in Colorado in the 1920s; there were 17,000

Klan members in Denver alone. Governor Clarence Morley and Denver Mayor Ben Stapleton were both Klansmen. These were also Klan members and their sponsored candidates in the Colorado State House and Senate, and Supreme and District Courts.

Lincoln Hills was particularly important to African Americans in the first half of the 20th century because they were barred from many leisure opportunities open to whites. The resort was an oasis where they could hike, fish and camp in peace, and leave racial prejudices behind.

Obrey Wendell "Winks" Hamlet and his wife Nanmi played important roles in the establishment of Lincoln Hills. In 1925, the couple began construction on Winks Lodge, also called Winks Panorama. It was the first full-service resort in Lincoln Hills and was finished in 1928. Winks Panorama is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Since there were only a handful of resorts during that era which catered to black citizens, Winks Lodge drew many of the nation's most talented African American creative luminaries. Musicians Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Lena Horne visited. The Hamlets also hosted many famed African American authors including Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Thurston.

Throughout the Great Depression, World War II and until the mid-1960s, the Lincoln Hills resort continued to hold a unique and significant place in the African American community. After the Civil Rights Movement, there were fewer and fewer visitors since more opportunities began to open up for black citizens.

Fast-forward fifty years. In 2008, Robert F. Smith and Matthew Burkett, avid fly-fishermen, entrepreneurs and philanthropists purchased the 177-acre property that contains seven miles of river.



Youth participating in the Lincoln Hills Cares Outdoor Education Program examine elk and deer antlers found on the property. PHOTO COURTESY OF LINCOLN HILLS CARES

Mr. Smith grew-up in Denver and vacationed at Lincoln Hills as a child. His mother, who has a PhD in Education, carried him in her arms at the March on Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech. A graduate of East High School, Cornell University and Columbia Business School, he went on to found Vista Equity Partners, a highly successful private equity firm.

Mr. Burkett is the founder of The Flyfisher Group, a capital, consulting and holding company that specializes in growing sustainable assets. A graduate of Oberlin College, he has founded over 10 companies in his 20-year career. Mr. Burkett is also a professional, glabotrotting fly angler.

Originally, Smith and Burkett utilized the Lincoln Hills property primarily as a fly-fishing retreat, but their vision of what it could be has begun to take shape. In 2009, they established Lincoln Hills Cares to serve underprivileged youth, their families and veterans. The organization has four core

programs: Lincoln Hills Educational Programs, Nizhoni Summer Equestrian Program, TeamWorks Youth Work Program and Anglers of Honor.

Lincoln Hills Cares Outdoor Educational Programs offers interactive outdoor experiences for youth. They make new friends while participating in group activities centered on a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) based curriculum.

The Nizhoni Summer Equestrian Program provides youth and teen girls confidence building equestrian experiences. Camp Nizhoni, which mean "beautiful" in Navaho, has a rich history. Originally founded in 1924, it was created in response to the segregationist policies of the time that prevented African American girls from attending the same YMCA as white children.

Metro Denver and Gilpin Counties 16-20 year olds participate in the TeamWorks Youth Work Program, which is an eight-week service learning experience. The program is designed to be a resume builder for college appli-

cations as well as an opportunity to acquire leadership skills. Participants are also paid \$10-\$12 an hour to perform maintenance work on the Lincoln Hills property.

The Anglers with Honor program serves veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. During the summer, small groups and their families are given the opportunity to fly-fish on the property as a thank-you for their service to the country.

In 2015, over 1200 children and their families participated in various activities through LHC. To date, more than 600 veterans and their families have taken part in fishing activities that help in their recovery process.

While Smith and Burkett have generously provided the seed funding for LHC, the organization is also pursuing other donors and grants, as well as businesses willing to provide in-kind support for various equipment.

For more information on LHC please visit [lincolnhillscares.org](http://lincolnhillscares.org) or email [J.R.Lapierre at jr@lincolnhillscares.org](mailto:J.R.Lapierre@lincolnhillscares.org).

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