

Sidedoor Season 5, Episode 9: Shredding Skateboarding's Glass Ceiling

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Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: Mimi Knoop moved a lot as a kid. And wherever she landed, she found a group of friends who all shared at least one thing. They loved skateboarding.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And in the 1980s, that meant Mimi hung out with a lot of boys.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: I didn't have any other girlfriends that skated. So yeah, I just had my friends that were boys were who I skated with from that time, all the way until my early 20s, I would say.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: After college, Mimi moved to the Virgin Islands to work as a bartender, as one does. And one day, as she cleaned glasses and wiped down the bar top, something on TV caught her eye.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: I glanced up and saw a women's skateboarding contest on the TV, which you didn't really see skateboarding in general on tv back then, so it was a big deal to begin with. And then I realized they were women. And I'm like, "Wait a second!"

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: And I'm like, "Shoot, I missed the boat." Like, I should have tried that. I didn't know you could do that. I never saw really any other girls, or women either, in any of the magazines or videos. So, I, it never clicked for me that that was an option.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, you felt like you'd already missed your opportunity?

Mimi Knoop: Yeah! I mean, I was like, 22 years old. So, I was like, "Well, oh, well. You know, I blew it."

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Over the hill!

Mimi Knoop: Too bad I didn't get into that. (Laughs) Yeah! I'm over the hill. Too bad I didn't get into that, you know, 10 years ago. But um, yeah, it just kind of planted the seed that that was out there, but I had no idea that I could do that.

Lizzie Peabody: When mixing margaritas got old, Mimi moved to San Diego, which is a bit of a skateboarding Mecca. Hanging around San Diego's skate parks, Knoop found a new crew, but this time, something was different. There were girls there! And one of them was a skateboarder named Cara-Beth Burnside. And for those of us who weren't women's skateboarding buffs in the early 2000's, bumping into Cara-Beth Burnside at a skate park is a bit like practicing free throws at your local rec center and meeting Michael Jordan.

Mimi Knoop: And one thing led to another and she's like, "You should enter these contests with us."

Lizzie Peabody: Which is kinda like MJ asking you if you want to join the Chicago Bulls. The only answer is, "Heck yes!" And that's how Knoop came to enter her first skateboarding competition. But first, she had to learn one important thing, called "Dropping in."

Mimi Knoop: Dropping in is one of the first things you learn as a skater if you're skating ramps or transition, because it's just a way for you to begin your run.

Lizzie Peabody: Here's how it works. You climb up to a platform at one end of a tall U-shaped ramp.

Mimi Knoop: So, you walk up and you put your board on the side of the ramp.

Lizzie Peabody: With your back foot, you pin the board on the edge of the ramp, so it sticks out like a diving board. And then, with your other foot, you step onto the front of the skateboard and lean your weight forward. And then, you fall until the ramp catches the board's wheels under you.

[SOUND OF SKATEBOARDING ON RAMPS]

Mimi Knoop: You definitely have to commit. And, you know, a lot of people will half commit and then they'll slip back...

Lizzie Peabody: Landing on their back or butt...

Mimi Knoop: And a lot of people over commit and then, they slam forward.

Lizzie Peabody: Landing on their face...

Mimi Knoop: That's one of the scariest things I would say. Once you figure out how to get over that, then you can kind of do anything.

Lizzie Peabody: So, having just learned to drop in, Knoop enters the same competition she saw two years earlier on TV.

Mimi Knoop: Which is pretty crazy. I was horrified. For me, it was survival mode of just (laughs), go and like, participate and get out of there. I definitely got last place. Like, it was no question in my mind. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Mimi Knoop: I was just excited to be there.
[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Mimi actually didn't finish in last place. She came in fifth place, out of seven skateboarders. And, she got paid!

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: I think I won like \$100 and I've never been more excited about a check before.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: I just was like, "Wow! This is money that came to me for riding my skateboard. Like how cool is that?"

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Now, technically, Mimi was a professional skateboarder. And she was just getting started. So, this time on Sidedoor, we tell the story of how Mimi Knoop, alongside her friend, Cara-Beth Burnside, forged an alliance to pick a fight with a billion-dollar industry that refused to see their value, as skateboarders and as women.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: All that, after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

Online 1995 EPSN X-Games – Newport, Rhode Island Web Clip: It's the dawn of a new age, and your perception of sports is about to change. No bats, no balls, no sticks, and no boundaries.

Lizzie Peabody: This is how ESPN heralded a new era of sports. On June 24, 1995, the sports broadcaster debuted their brand-new sports festival in the most extreme place you can imagine: Newport, Rhode Island.

Online 1995 EPSN X-Games – Newport, Rhode Island Web Clip: From this day forward, the world of sports will never be the same. These are the Extreme Games!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Kick off your boat shoes because it's time for The Extreme Games, but you probably know them as the X-Games. This series of radical sporting events happened in cities from Rhode Island to Maine. Tim Reed is from Newport, and he remembers the energy these games brought to the region.

Tim Reed: Wind surfing was at one location; wakeboarding was at another. They had mountain biking up in New Hampshire or Vermont. I can't remember which one. So, it was like, a lot of satellite venues, but then...

Lizzie Peabody: Reed knows a thing or two about the X-Games. Because today, he's the Vice President of the X-Games. Other sports from the first games included street luge, roller blading and something called, "sky surfing."

Online X-Games Gold Medal Jump – Troy Hartman - Web Clip: This is a great round for Troy Hartman finishing with the row gain and it all started with the incredible, invisible man.

Tim Reed: So, I think that was the whole conceit early on was, there's all these kinds of disparate adventure, extreme sports that are out there. Let's try to bring them all together, create the Olympics of action sports or extreme sports and kind of see where it goes.

Lizzie Peabody: Since the X-Games were so new, in its first few years, organizers kinda just figured it out as they went. Here's Chris Stiepok, the guy in charge of the X-Games back then.

Chris Stiepok: Those first couple of years in Rhode Island, we were all just innocent. And we were just trying to figure it all out, start a brand. And the athletes who competed in those sports were very gifted. And they were really just waiting for a platform.

Lizzie Peabody: And the X-Games turned out to be the perfect platform. In 1997, the Games added a second event to their annual calendar. This time, for winter sports.

Online Shovel Racing 1997 X-Games John's Crash Web Clip: The very nature of several Winter-X events spells danger: ice climbing, big air, downhill bikes, and super-modified shovels.

Lizzie Peabody: A point of clarification. "Super modified shovels" are these torpedo-shaped sleds that hurdled down steep hills at insane speeds.

Online Shovel Racing 1997 X-Games John's Crash Web Clip: ...as we head back out to our Shovel course. Now, some viewers might wish to turn away from the race that follows because of its graphic content on Miracle Mile.

Lizzie Peabody: As far as I can tell, this is a sport designed to showcase spectacular crashes.

Online Shovel Racing 1997 X-Games John's Crash Web Clip: Straiter's in trouble! Straiter's flipping end over end over end!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: By the late 1990s, the X-Games had largely congealed into the games we know today. ESPN relentlessly promoted its biggest stars, and a handful of male skateboarders, like Tony Hawk, became global icons.

[MUSIC]

Online Tony Hawk Jumps Into the Water At X-Games 1996 Web Clip: (In German).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This generated a ton of money for the X-Games, and the athletes they showcased. But while the men cashed in, the women didn't. I asked Betsy Gordon about this.

She's a skateboard Curator at the National Museum of the American Indian and unofficial Smithsonian skateboarding historian. And she said to understand why this might be, you have to take a look back to how skateboarding evolved. After all, it's a pretty new sport.

Betsy Gordon: It's really interesting to me because the first commercially available skateboards were in the '60s. And if you look at those advertisements in magazines, they always show girls and boys skating. And then, in the '70s, as skating started growing up, and they started having skateboard competitions, lots of girls skated.

Lizzie Peabody: This is right around the time Cara-Beth Burnside started skating. You might remember her as, "the Michael Jordan of women's skateboarding." When she was a kid, there were contests for girls, but after a couple years, they got canceled.

Cara-Beth Burnside: And the only thing that was out there for me was the skate with the amateur boys. So, that meant like, you know, the ones like Tony Hawk did.

Lizzie Peabody: Without contests, not many girls built reputations as star skaters. So, skate magazines didn't pay much attention.

Betsy Gordon: In the '80s, with the dawn of more mass skate media, magazines, somehow girls just weren't getting in there, weren't getting the coverage.

Lizzie Peabody: For the most part, the only women you'd see in skateboarding magazines, well, they sure weren't skateboarders.

Betsy Gordon: Well, in terms of advertising, they were showing models and models that didn't have a lot of clothes on for the most part. So, it was very highly sexualized. So, I think it was very hard for women, who skated, to see themselves reflected in media, but also to see themselves where other skaters skated.

Lizzie Peabody: And since female skaters weren't shown in movies and magazines, sponsors didn't support them. And since they didn't get sponsor money, it was hard to make a living.

Cara-Beth Burnside: Well, I wanted to be a Pro Skateboarder, but even if I'm on a team, and the company likes me, if the dudes that skate are complaining because they have a girl on the team, and they're giving product, but, "Oh, shoot, if we start paying you, those guys are going to be bummed and complaining, you know?"

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. Even if a company wanted to sponsor a female skateboarder, they might get pushback from male skateboarders! So, in the early 1990s, Burnside was one of the few Pro female Skateboarders who had a corporate sponsor. Vans, one of the biggest names in skateboarding apparel, sponsored her to the tune of \$50 a month.

Cara-Beth Burnside: So, I started entering contests, Pro and skating with the guys, but it didn't matter! Like, I couldn't ever be good enough. (Laughs). Like, I thought I had like, really good tricks and I did, but it's like, you're a girl. And that's just the way it is.

Lizzie Peabody: It was so hard making a living in skateboarding as a woman, that Burnside had to go Pro in a second sport to support herself.

[MUSIC]

Cara-Beth Burnside: Yeah, I started snowboarding because I couldn't do what I wanted to do in skateboarding, you know? It was just really hard. I lived near Tahoe and I went and there were all these girls' contests. And I was like, "Holy *BLEEP*! They're winning that much money. Like, I gotta get good at this."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, she did! And she became one of the best! In the 1998 Winter X-Games, Burnside finished first in half-pipe.

Online Cara-Beth Burnside 1998 Winter X-Games Web Clip: She is the best women's skateboarder in the world! And you're right. You see it included in her style in super pipe. Nice backside alley-oop! Very nice! (Crowd Applause).

Lizzie Peabody: And for that gold medal, the X-Games awarded her \$10,000.00!

Cara-Beth Burnside: And then my sponsor, like doubled it. So, that's 20 G's. It was just like, "Okay, well, I'm winning big money snowboarding." I still wanted to skate, but I had to figure out a way to make money.

Lizzie Peabody: Burnside was also a member of the first-ever U.S. Olympic Snowboarding team. And just think about that. Most people, if they need extra money, they become a bartender, a tutor, a waiter, or they weave their own potholders, you know, a typical part time job. But Burnside, she went Pro in a second sport. That's amazing. Then, in late '90s, Vans made the Cara-Beth Burnside shoe. It was just the second shoe to be named after a female athlete in any sport. Meanwhile, Mimi Knoop, Burnside's pal who we left back in San Diego, wondered if it was possible for any female skater who wasn't Cara-Beth Burnside to make a career in skateboarding.

Mimi Knoop: It became pretty clear pretty quick that there's a glass ceiling there and I was seeing people that I looked up to that were the best in the world, like, not bringing home very much money and...

Lizzie Peabody: But she kept grinding.

Online Web Clip of Mimi Knoop Skateboarding: Our next rider in is Mimi Knoop! (Crowd Applause).

Lizzie Peabody: Her event was called the, "vert" named after the ramp's tall vertical walls. And at the beginning of her competitive career, Mimi mostly finished in fourth or fifth. But over time, she'd occasionally crack the podium. Until after a while, she started to win.

Online Web Clip of Mimi Knoop Skateboarding: Now, Mimi's known for being a solid, consistent competitor. That's why she took that win last week at the Soul Bowl.

Lizzie Peabody: Knoop says the contests made her better.

Mimi Knoop: I would more or less get ideas at the end of a contest, and then it was like fuel for me to work on certain things.

Online Web Clip of Mimi Knoop Skateboarding: Look at that frontside boneless! Yeah Mimi! I never saw her do that before!

Lizzie Peabody: As she climbed the women's skateboarding ranks, one trick that Mimi perfected was something called a front-side invert. Honestly, I've watched a bunch of skateboarding videos in the last few weeks, and this one is by far the easiest to explain.

[SOUND OF SKATEBOARDING ON RAMPS]

Mimi Knoop: So, you ride up the ramp, and you pivot on your front hand on the top of the ramp. And then, the board goes over your head and then you aim for where you're planted hand is and you push off the wall. And then, land where you're planted hand is.

Lizzie Peabody: So, you plant your hand on the wall, you and your skateboard swivel around. And then land where your hand is planted.

Mimi Knoop: Exactly.

Lizzie Peabody: So, I'm almost picturing like a one-handed cartwheel, but sideways.

Mimi Knoop: Kind of like that. Yeah!

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Mimi Knoop: And it's a little blind on the re-entry. So, that's why it's a little scary. You don't really know... it's kind of like, you just have to commit and hope it works out, you know, the first couple times. (Laughs).

[SOUND OF SKATEBOARDING ON RAMPS]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm seeing a theme here. (Laughs).

Mimi Knoop: (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Well, it makes for great skateboarding. "Commit, and hope it works out" is also kinda how Mimi approached her skateboarding career. And it did work out. In 2003, she was invited to the first X-Games that featured women's skateboarding as a medaled event. It was in downtown Los Angeles.

Mimi Knoop: I was like, "Whoa, like, this is what I used to watch on TV, you know, in high school" or whatever, and yeah, so I was ecstatic to go and just participate.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The X-Games were held in the Staples Center. It's a huge multi-purpose arena shared by Kobe Bryant and his L.A. Lakers, the NBA's Clippers and hockey's Kings.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Here's X-Games VP Tim Reed again.

[MUSIC]

Tim Reed: Hundreds of thousands of people are coming out to the event.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Oh wow!

[MUSIC]

Tim Reed: It's a big gathering, music, events, downtown LA. So, at that point, I mean again, it felt like the event had definitely arrived and, you know, everyone was aware of it. And it was great.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: In those early years, it was... it felt validating. Like, it felt like okay, like, you know, people were backing our skating because we were on this big stage.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, at that first X-Games, was that the largest audience you'd ever skated in front of?

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: Honestly, at that time, I think... No. I remember the sands being pretty empty.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: Our contests in those years were like, held before the doors were open a lot of times. So, like...

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Mimi Knoop: ...there wouldn't even be people in the stands. Like, maybe your mom and dad or friends that you invited, but like, yeah, the public... they'd be like, "Doors open at noon!" And then, they'd have a contest like 10 or 11 in the morning, or like, directly after the doors open. So, no one's really in there.

Lizzie Peabody: Why did they schedule you before the doors open?

Mimi Knoop: That's a question you should ask ESPN and those guys. I have no idea.

Chris Stiepock: I don't really know the specifics with what Mimi was talking about, but we tended to have everything open all the time.

Lizzie Peabody: X-Games boss, Chris Stiepock.

Chris Stiepock: Our hours would be like, you know, 11 am to 8 pm. And with skateboarding, you know, one of the disciplines was the vert ramp, and so there's only so many competitions we

can put on the vert ramp during the course of the day. You want to put the competitions that you feel have the best opportunity to rate with an audience. And, you know, when you've got Tony Hawk on a vert ramp, that means men's skateboarding is gonna get a good time slot.

Lizzie Peabody: And not only were the female skaters relegated to a bad timeslot, they weren't put on TV at all. So, Mimi's family couldn't really share the moment with her.

Mimi Knoop: At the time, we kept being promised like, TV coverage. Like, you guys are going to be on TV this time, and then it would never happen. You know, my family's from the east coast and getting an invite the week before made it really tough for them to be able to come and support and be a part of it too. So, we just felt overlooked a lot.

Lizzie Peabody: And it's worth saying again. These are the world's best female skateboarders, at the world's biggest skateboarding event, but they felt that the X-Games didn't respect them as professionals because they were women in 2003, in 2004 and 2005 didn't look much better.

Mimi Knoop: In 2005, men's first place was 50 grand and women's was two grand.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow! (Laughs). Wow! That's 50. Five – Zero - Thousand dollars for the men.

Mimi Knoop: Yes. 50, 5-0 grand. Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: For context, the last place male skater earned \$2,000.00, which is the same amount as the first-place female skater.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: (Takes deep breath). Mimi remembers this really frustrating story from one of her first X-Games. There was a male skateboarder who attended the X-Games, but didn't compete.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: He just sat there and smoked cigarettes. So, like, he ended up getting two grand for doing nothing.

Lizzie Peabody: What?!

Mimi Knoop: An that's where it really became polarizing for us. And we're like, "Dude, this is not cool." You know? Like... (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: Not cool! So, heading into the 2005 X-Games, Knoop and Burnside made a plan to grab the attention of Stiepock and the X-Games organizers, so they might finally get the equal treatment they deserved. Coming up, after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, it's spring 2005. And the world's best female skateboarders are fed up with the X-Games. Their gripes were numerous, and they were legit! If Cara-Beth Burnside was Martin Luther, here's the list she'd be nailing to ESPN's door.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Number one! Earlier notice on X-Games' invitations. Number two! Some, any, time on television. Three! Most of all, prize money that was more than 4% the size of men's prizes. 4%! Things were unfair, but one fateful day, Mimi got a call from her mom.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: My mom went back to college. She went to college in her 50s. And Drew came in. He was one of the guest speakers.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: She's talking about Drew Mearns. He's a big time sports Agent. In a way, he's like the Cara-Beth Burnside of his field.

[MUSIC]

Drew Mearns: For a period of 10 years, I represented every single winner of the New York City Marathon and the Boston Marathon.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, Drew gave a presentation to Mimi's mom's class. And afterward, she went up to him and said...

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: "Hey, can you help my daughter? You know, she's trying to be a professional skateboarder." So, that's how I met Drew.

[MUSIC]

Drew Mearns: Originally, the meeting was about how Mimi could make money.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: And he, from the get go, was like, "Who else is involved? How is your sport structured?" He was just fascinated by how things worked.

Lizzie Peabody: Drew didn't know much about skateboarding, but he knew the business of sports. So, he understood Mimi's problem, as an athlete who was being undervalued.

Drew Mearns: The men at the X-Games were making \$50,000.00 for first prize and the women were getting a thousand, or at the most, \$2,000.00. That seemed like it was back in the, you know, (laughs) 1960s or early 1970s. So, that's how it all started.

Lizzie Peabody: Drew was in! So, Knoop and Burnside, and the other female skateboarders, headed into the 2005 X-Games irritated, but this time, they had a plan. On the evening of August 3rd, the skaters were hanging in their hotel room, talking things over. The first women's skateboarding event was scheduled to start the next day. And they decided not to show up.

Mimi Knoop: We actually didn't call it a boycott. We just decided not to show up.

[MUSIC]

Drew Mearns: And so, what we did is, I said, "Look, just don't show up."

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: And, of course, the phone started ringing.

Drew Mearns: I was getting calls like crazy because they were saying, "Mearns, we know you. What do you want? Is it you want money?" "No. We don't want anything."

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: There are some pretty crazy voicemails left on Cara-Beth's phone that morning. You know, "Get down here or you guys are done," kind of thing.

[MUSIC]

Drew Mearns: "I just want to sit down with you after this event and talk about how we can bring the girls towards equal pay, you know, better situation, different events, whatever we want to do."

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: It wasn't like, we were like, "Pay us right now." It wasn't like that. We were like, "We want a meeting. We want to have a voice in our own events." Like, there are some serious gaps here, and we want to be involved.

Lizzie Peabody: And the exasperated X-Games organizers said...

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: "Let's do it. Like, if you guys can get the girls to show up, we'll give you a meeting."

[MUSIC]

Drew Mearns: "Yeah, yeah. Okay, we'll do it. Just make sure the girls show up." And they did.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: So, the women's street skaters showed up, they skated their event. The very next day, we had our women's vert contests and we showed up, skated.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The X-Games got their event, as promised. And the skaters waited for their call from the organizers.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: And then, crickets. Crickets for almost a year after that.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For a good chunk of the year, silence. And then, in June 2006, with next the X-Games just a few weeks away, the organizers said, "Let's talk." For backup, Drew called around his sports agent circles and linked up with the head of the Women's Sports Foundation and asked her to come along as well. So, the day of the meeting arrives. Everyone gathers in an ESPN boardroom in New York City. And Drew remembers someone from the X-Games explaining why women's skateboarding didn't look good on TV.

Drew Mearns: And he goes, "Well, you know, women, when they go off the vert ramp, they only go up two or three feet. They don't do the same kind of tricks as the boys. And that's the reason. So, that's why nobody watches."

Lizzie Peabody: We asked Stiepock about that and he said, "Yeah, that sounds right."

Chris Stiepock: I can definitely imagine somebody saying that. I've heard that many times. It could have been a producer, you know, responsible for shooting good television. For a long time, that was kind of the elephant in the room. The girls just hadn't gotten very good yet. But by '05 and '06, they had.

Lizzie Peabody: To hear someone from the X-Games say basically, "Well, their tricks aren't as good as the men's," isn't exactly the answer Drew's crew was looking for. But then the CEO of the Women's Sports Foundation asks...

Drew Mearns: "Well, why do you think that is?" And, and that's where I think that the collective ESPN male dominated X-Games staff made a mistake. He just said, "Everybody knows the women don't want to try too hard to jump big things. They're afraid of getting hurt."

Lizzie Peabody: What?! For what it's worth, Stiepock says he doesn't remember anyone saying that and he doesn't believe anyone from ESPN would have said that in a meeting.

Chris Stiepock: I don't think somebody would say that they're afraid to get hurt. That's just sheer ignorance. And if somebody had said that in a meeting setting with outside people, they would have gotten verbally reprimanded afterwards, I believe.

Lizzie Peabody: Either way, for whatever reason, after the meeting, Drew's phone rang. It was John Skipper, a senior executive at ESPN. Basically Stiepock's boss, who all of a sudden was very interested in the changes requested by Mimi and Cara-Beth. He asked them for a meeting at the upcoming X-Games.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: John Skipper invited them to his luxury box at the Staples Center. Mimi remembers the meeting's tone being friendly.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: You know, he was a really nice guy. He was like, "Look. I'm sorry we didn't come through on this promise to you guys. Like, how can I help you" basically. And we asked for three things from him. We asked for an increase in prize money over a few-year span, and then equal purses. And we asked for increased media exposure.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Television! Photographers! Basically, they wanted equality.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: And then we... the third thing we asked for was we want to organize our own events.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Essentially, the female skateboarding events felt like they were an afterthought to the X-Games' organizers. So, the skateboarders would do it themselves.

[MUSIC]

Mimi Knoop: He said, "Well, what do you guys want the purse to be this year?" You know, "What's an amount we can come up with, that everyone will be stoked on?" And he said, "10 grand for first or something?"

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Mimi Knoop: And, and so I wrote 15 down on a piece of paper and like, slid it to Cara-Beth and she was like, "15!" And so, (laughs) we have a joke. He approved it. And we have a joke now. I'm like, "Dude, you owe me five grand, like, I got you five grand that day."

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Mimi Knoop: Because she won the next day.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Burnside took home 15 grand for winning at the 2006 X-Games. Not equality, but it was a good first step. The prize money went up again the following year. And on October 27, 2008, the X-Games announced that men and women would earn equal prize money, not just in skateboarding, but in every sport. After years of no pay, low pay, and being dismissed, Cara-Beth Burnside and Mimi Knoop earned equal pay for female skateboarders.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And today, both are still working hard to make the sport better, in their own way. Cara-Beth Burnside, the two-sport star who won 8 X-Games medals over 14 years, coaches girls and boys in skateboarding, and still skates herself in her free time. And as for Mimi Knoop, well, she's now the coach of the first ever U.S. Women's Olympic skateboarding

team. The sport was set to make its debut at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, but the games have been pushed back to the summer of 2021.

Mimi Knoop: We've all been on an emotional rollercoaster, you know, with the with the schedule change, the pandemic. Mostly, I feel for skaters. The ones that are ranked really high right now at the top of their game. Like now, they have to wait a whole 'nother year and hope they keep that position, but we're continuing to keep the culture of skateboarding solid, and yeah, just trying to enhance their experience with this whole thing.

Lizzie Peabody: And together, along with Drew Mearns, they created the Action Sports Alliance, to continue to empower and develop future generations of female skateboarders. And the Smithsonian's own Betsy Gordon says she's seen slow, but steady growth in the skateboarding industry.

Betsy Gordon: It hasn't been until very, very recently that women have been getting sponsorships, shoes, boards, grip tape, wheels. And, you know, it's 2020! That is shocking to me that it's taken that industry so long to kind of embrace young women and young women skating.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It's taken time, but today, skateboarding has become a fairer place for women. And even as the X-Games did the right thing, Gordon says that there are still battles ahead for the next generation of female athletes. But unlike when Knoop and Burnside were growing up, this generation can see it's been done before. And they know what's possible.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to see some skateboards used by pioneering female skateboarders from the 1960s and '70s, they can be seen on display at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. Check them out when the museum reopens to the public. In the meantime, you can check out Mimi Knoop's skateboard deck and Cara-Beth Burnside's signature Vans shoes in our newsletter. Sign up at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Enormous thanks to Mimi Knoop, Cara-Beth Burnside, Drew Mearns, Jane Rogers, Tim Reed, Grace Coryell, Betsy Gordon, Chris Stiepock, Sarah Axelson and Patty Bifulco at the Women's Sports Foundation.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Nathalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, Sharon Bryant, and Tami O'Neill. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John, Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, do you skateboard yourself?

Betsy Gordon: No! I don't. I come to skateboarding as a skate mom.

Lizzie Peabody: A skate mom?

Betsy Gordon: Yes. It's maybe kind of like a soccer mom?

Lizzie Peabody: But cooler, I think!

Betsy Gordon: No.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Betsy Gordon: I think no.

Lizzie Peabody: No? (Laughs).

[MUSIC]