

Finding her passion along a frozen snow covered trail



Photo special to the COURIER
Karin Hendrickson waves to the crowd as she kicks off the first leg of the 2009 Iditarod in Alaska.

Karin Hendrickson answered the call of the wild. In March, the former Mt. Baldy resident ran the punishing Iditarod, the world's most famous sled dog race.

For 12 days and for more than 1,100 miles, Ms. Hendrickson ran a course from Anchorage to Nome, in fierce competition with the elements and 66 other teams. She had help from her team of 16 dogs who, despite funny names—Scooby, Skeeter, Cerveza, Luna, Deja, Shotgun and Wazoo—take the sport of mushing very seriously.

Running and slogging through rugged terrain, with a team of dogs amped-up like a freight train, may sound like an unusual idea of a good time. Throw in sub-zero temperatures and a hallucination-inducing lack of sleep and it sounds downright crazy.

In fact, it was the next logical step for Ms. Hendrickson, 38, who quit her job as an air pollution analyst 6 years ago and moved to Alaska to become a “dog bum.”

Why did she do it? Blame her mother.

Learning the ropes

Baldy resident Gwen Rodman introduced her daughter to the Iditarod. As an elementary school teacher, Ms. Rodman had used the Iditarod as a teaching tool. From multiplication to nutrition, from geography to character, the competition offers instructive and exciting fodder for young minds.

When she retired 11 years ago, Ms. Rodman decided travel to Alaska to experience what she'd been teaching firsthand. Iditarod organizers are always looking for volunteers to help pull off the monolithic event, from answering phones to holding back dogs who are raring to go before the start of the race.

She found the race and its locale exhilarating and has gone back every year since. In 2002, she convinced her daughter to come along.

As Ms. Hendrickson explains on her website, BlueOnBlackDogs.com, she was “indulging her mother” when she signed up to volunteer. “I expected to answer phones, update reports, and maybe do a little spectating,” she said. “A nice time with mom, maybe a little *dogging*.”

Later, Ms. Rodman contacted an acquaintance and finagled an opportunity for her daughter to drive her own team of five dogs in the Yukon 250 race. After a promising start, the sled flipped on its side, leaving Ms. Hendrickson sliding, face to the snow, for a hundred yards while she fumbled with the snow hook, a large metal claw used to stop the sled by anchoring it in the snow.

Mishap followed mishap. Once she got the sled going again, she had problems with the brakes and crashed into her host's sled. Her lip was bleeding and she spat ice chips out of her mouth, but she managed to get the team righted. She went for another run and things improved.

"And off we went to finish the run," Ms. Hendrickson relates on her blog. "The dogs cheerily panting, the runners whishing along, and nothing but trees, snow and sky for miles around. I had found a new passion, but had no idea how far it would take me."

In 2003, she returned to Alaska and helped a friend prepare for the Iditarod. Somewhere along the way, Ms. Hendrickson realized she didn't want to go home. She returned to Idaho, quit her job, sold her house and headed back to Alaska.

Finding a sledding partner

Alaska's nickname, "The Last Frontier," and its relatively sparse population can give the state a lonesome sound. Ms. Hendrickson spent 2004 and 2005 handling dogs for Iditarod mushers, followed by a period of recuperation after a serious mushing accident. At some point, she acquired a full-time day job at the Alaska Division of Environmental Health.

Before long, she had company. Varan Hoyt, a former schoolmate with whom she grew up in Baldy, was intrigued when he found out what Ms. Hendrickson was up to. He flew up to see her and campfire-bright sparks flew between them. It was only a few weeks before Mr. Hoyt moved to Alaska.

In January 2006, the couple exchanged vows on the third mile of the Iditarod trail. The couple and guests rode dog sleds to the wedding and celebrated their union by making snow angels.

That summer, the newlyweds put a dog lot at their home, located on 2 1/2 acres in Chugiak, a city near Anchorage. Since then, they've been adding to their collection of sled dogs and training and racing them. Their small kennel, which they named Blue on Black for the bruises mushers endure during mushing season, now houses 20 hardy canines. Within 3 years, Ms. Hendrickson had enough dogs with strength and discipline to think of running in the Iditarod herself.

Ms. Rodman still marvels at how things snowballed.

"Isn't it funny how life goes? It just evolved," she said.

Competing in the great race

Ms. Hendrickson and her team of 16 dogs finished in 40th place in the 2009 Iditarod, which marked the 36th anniversary of the event. Just finishing is an accomplishment given a dozen teams dropped out during the course of the race.

Ms. Hendrickson had a moment or two where she longed to go home herself. She encountered a lifetime of adventures and misadventures on the trail, which includes stops at checkpoints in remote locales with native-originated names like Shageluk, Unalakleet, Shaktoolik and Koyuk.

At each checkpoint mushers can choose to debark from their sleds to get a drink, some food, rest and even bed down for a few hours. One had a fajita bar while another featured moose stew and moist cloths for toweling off. Such luxuries were welcome because the long runs were so taxing.

The challenges were numerous and included getting caught in a horrific snowstorm, temperatures of 50 below, getting sick off fume-tainted water and running a grueling schedule of 8 hours mushing and 4 hours resting, a cycle that allowed for only a couple of stolen hours of sleep. Night blended into day and at one point she was so tired, she hallucinated she was traveling with a team of aliens instead of dogs.

Ms. Hendrickson got through the rough spots by consciously relaxing and focusing on the goal of getting to the next checkpoint. While she wilted, the rest of the team seemed only to gain energy as the competition progressed.

"The dogs kept getting stronger and stronger," Hendrickson explained. "It's called peaking. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to hold them."

Raising money to feed a hungry crew

Running the Iditarod is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but Karin Hendrickson plans to do it again. In fact, she has already started fundraising efforts for the 2010 Iditarod. It takes money to support and equip a team of sled dogs. This year alone, they spent \$11,000 on dog food.

With this in mind, Ms. Rodman held a benefit called "Fishing for Dollars." More than 60 people crowded into her Baldy home for a salmon dinner, followed by a slide presentation of her daughter's experiences.

Finishing the Iditarod taught Ms. Hendrickson a lot about endurance.

"You really are on your own out there. That's kind of the spirit of the race. You have to be able to handle yourself."

For more information visit www.blueonblack-dogs.com.

—Sarah Torribio



Photo by Brian Hall
Mt. Baldy resident Gwen Rodman shares photos of her daughter, Karin Hendrixson. Ms. Rodman, a retired elementary school teacher, introduced her daughter to Alaska and the Iditarod in 2002.