Nye’s News

Dear Teachers,

Welcome back to a new school year. If you are a new teacher, welcome to the profession. If you are new to the Iditarod, welcome to the what could be the best experience of your teaching career. Better watch out though—you’ll be hooked and it might change your teaching!

I am quite excited as I see that we are under 200 days until race start. I know that once my school year starts it will fly by! I want my year to go slowly so I can enjoy every experience as the Teacher on the Trail. I would like to thank Finney and Diane Johnson for their postings over the last two Iditarod races. As the Teachers on the Trail before me, they have set a very high standard. I know that I will be different; I hope you will all bear with me as I mush through it. I gratefully acknowledge all the hard work that they, and the race organizers, put into building this program. It has been a tremendous pleasure to know them via e-mail and to read and implement their ideas. I salute you both!

I would hope that each teacher reading this would e-mail me; tell me what school you teach at, your grade level and your city and state so that my third grade students can map out where other Iditarod-following classes are. I am dedicating my race to the memories of two very special people, one near and dear to my heart and one whom I never had the pleasure of meeting. My grandmother was one of the dearest people in my life. She lived less than 100 yards away from me when I was a young child and continued to be my biggest supporter throughout my life. She passed away in July of 1999 as I was preparing my Teacher on the Trail application packet. I made my first trip to Alaska two weeks after her funeral. She was so excited for my trip and she would have loved seeing all my photos and listening to my stories, especially about the kennels I visited. I’d been teaching with the Iditarod for three or four years when I learned that she, too, was an Iditarod lover. Our common interest gave us many hours of good discussion over the last years of her life. So I dedicate my involvement this year to her, Nellie Wands of Pueblo, Colorado. She passed away at 97 years of age with the heart and spirit of a much younger person. One of her favorite sayings was, “Not age but attitude!”

A cyber-friend of mine, Don Bowers, passed away in June when he was involved in a plane crash on Mt. McKinley. Don was a teacher, a writer, a pilot, a musher and an Iditarod finisher. Don was one of the first people who wrote me when I was named the Teacher on the Trail for 2001 to congratulate me and he often dropped me notes of things to share with the students next year. Even after two months it is with much sadness that I ponder his loss. I was so eager to meet him when I returned to Alaska and he was eager to run the race in 2001. So I also dedicate my
involvement with the race to him. Even though I didn’t personally know Don, I felt like I did. I miss his notes, his concern for students, and his attention to the details. I read his book Back of the Pack this summer, a must reading for Iditarod fans! Don was named one of the honorary mushers for the 2001 Iditarod, a fitting tribute to a wonderful person.

My biography will appear in another place on the web site; the important thing you should know is that I’m known as the “Iditarod teacher” in my small community—this was before I applied for Teacher on the Trail. I’ve been developing my own unit over the last eleven years. When I started, the Iditarod mailed out a teacher’s supplement if you requested it and that was the only published materials available relating to the race. What a joy now to have so many books for teachers and students related to the race! I have many of the books listed in the Bibliography section of the web site; each one is different and adds to the students’ knowledge of the race. I would suggest that you start with several good books and add to your collection each year. You could always ask for Iditarod related books and materials for Christmas each year; that’s what I do. My mom has supported the Iditarod each year at Christmas time and I eagerly look forward to the box of Christmas gifts from Alaska.

Each year I change what I do. I am not one who likes to do things the same way every year; each child is different and their needs are different. I try to address those needs much the way the mushers’ tune in to each dog’s needs.

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Nye’s News Posted
September 5, 2000

Here’s a get acquainted activity that you can use at the beginning of the year.

THREE TRUTHS AND A LIE

Each student writes three true statements about him or herself and a lie in mixed up order. Then in groups of 3 or 4, students try to figure out the lie for each person.

HERE’S AN EXAMPLE BASED ON MY LIFE:

1. I met Col. Sanders who created KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken).

2. I have a twin sister who lives in Littleton, Colorado, about a mile from Columbine High School.

3. My dad became a minister when I was 13 so I’m a PK (preacher’s kid).
4. Two of my three children have asthma and my husband has a serious illness.

Which is the false statement? At this point, talk to your students about a strategy to choose the lie. Which choices seem the most logical, the most likely to have happened, or be true?

Of course, this activity generates a lot of discussion. I first did this activity when I was at a workshop with my principal. I learned that he had lived in Panama, had come face to face with a flaring cobra when he was in second grade in San Diego, and his entire family changed their last name when he was a boy. Now I can’t even remember his lie but I was fascinated by the three truths that he shared with group. I still remember them after four or five years. Everyone will know more about each other after this activity. This would be hard for my third grade students but older students would enjoy this.

MY EXPLANATION:

Detail #1: Col. Sanders started KFC behind his home in Kentucky. My family and I lived in Kentucky when I was a girl and we visited his original restaurant before we returned to Colorado. I did meet him in person!

Detail #2: I don’t have a twin sister. My cousin lives a mile from Columbine High School and we are very close; she is like a sister to me.

Detail #3: My parents went back to college when I was in third grade. Then my father went to seminary to learn how to be a minister. That’s when we lived in Louisville, Kentucky. At 13 I became a PK.

Detail #4: My son and daughter both have asthma. My husband suffers from a rare disorder in which his adrenal glands don’t work.

NOTE: This idea was also presented at the Iditarod’s Teacher Workshop held last March in Anchorage by Jeanie Hicks of Rehoboth, Massachusetts. Jeanie presented it using math facts and story problems about the race; the cooperative group then had to find the lie in which the math solution was incorrect.

Welcome to the Teacher on the Trail™ section of the Iditarod site! I will be sharing more about myself and many, many ideas in the months to come. I hope that you will come back often, share ideas, and involve other teachers in following the Last Great Race!

Diane Nye August 23, 2000
Imagine taking a training run at 9:30 on a cool summer evening with Dean Osmar, 1984 Iditarod champion, and his handler, Linda Joy, also an Iditarod finisher, with eleven young huskies along the Cook Inlet. Imagine a week trip to Alaska with a former student. Imagine getting all of your Iditarod questions answered. Imagine the journey of your lifetime as a gift. Let me share my first Alaskan adventure with you.

It ended with eleven young huskies pulling me down the beach on an ATV overlooking the Cook Inlet; across the water I saw the mountains and volcanoes as the sun was setting behind them. It felt like a dream. I’m a small town Colorado gal. How did I end up in Alaska behind a dog team and an Iditarod musher? It was the greatest adventure of my life.

The adventure started about two years ago. I heard about the Teacher on the Trail program, a new endeavor that the Iditarod had just started with the help of Finney, the first TOTT. Instantly I knew I would be the TOTT someday. I didn’t know how but I knew I loved the race. I started pondering my involvement and when it would work in my life’s activities. I talked to the local newspaper and asked if they would run a story about my dream. The interview took place during the 1999 race so my students were all excited. We had a room full of student work and Iditarod memorabilia. It was the perfect article with many color photos.

A few weeks later the parents of a former student asked if I would like to go to Alaska for a week as their guest; I would accompany their son and stay at his grandparent’s bed and breakfast. They were willing to take me anywhere I wanted to go. They told me I could think about it; it took me about five seconds to decide. Naturally there were many details to be worked out and a mid-August trip was planned.

As the trip approached, I asked Shaun, their son, what he wanted to do while we were in Alaska. He said he only wanted to do one thing — meet Rick Swenson. Rick lives at Two Rivers, outside of Fairbanks, an eight-hour drive from Anchorage. The wheels went into motion to meet Rick. His grandparents asked me what I wanted to do and I said to meet as many mushers, tour as many kennels as we could, and see the glaciers. I saw this as my chance to see for myself how the dogs are cared for, how things really are. I’ve been teaching with the Iditarod for over ten years; I’ve
read many books, magazine articles, etc., but this was my chance to get my own firsthand experience.

I learned so much about the Iditarod from being in Alaska. I enjoyed my time at the Iditarod Headquarters building and I had to take a sled ride with Raymie Redington around the property. Shaun and I had been in Alaska less than twelve hours when we took our first sled ride – what a thrill! We took the second ride of the morning and the dogs were eager to run; we flew around the course. We were thrilled to be able to pet Zuma; Shaun wanted to stay inside with her.

From there we went to Martin Buser’s kennel. We couldn’t have asked for a nicer experience. He showed us his puppy wheels, still in the developmental stages, showed us everything we wanted to see and answered all of our questions. I will share more about the puppy wheels in a future posting; they are fascinating. The remnants of the Big Lake fire were still evident and chilling to see how close it came to his place. It was amazing to hear him talk of sending his family inland, taking the dogs to the lake, releasing them, and saving his house with energy provided by a backup generator. I enjoyed seeing him work with the dogs and how much they responded to his attention. I was impressed at his kennel and the others I visited how clean they were. There is no smell at all – I anticipated something different!

The remainder of that day was spent driving to Fairbanks. It was a clear day and you could see the Alaska Range through the trees. We had to make a stop at Goose Lake Studios where Jeff King has a display of one of his Iditarod trophies, photographs, bib, etc., as well as his wife’s artwork. It rained the entire day we were in the Fairbanks area so it was not as enjoyable as the day before. Rick does research for Eukanuba Dog Food so each doghouse has a large number painted on the side. The large numbers allow for the handlers and Rick to monitor and record each dog’s eating habits. The bowls for their feed are mounted on the top of the doghouse so they can’t tip over. This allows for accurate research. It was quite fascinating to witness the care for the research into dog feeding. Rick was building a large building by hand to house the dogs in the winter when there are long cold spells. Currently he has a smaller building that wasn’t as solid in its construction as the new building will be.

While in the Two Rivers’ area, we stopped by the cabin of Christopher Knott. Chris is a two-time Iditarod finisher who grew up in Colorado. My school had sponsored Chris’ dog, Hotfoot, during that year’s race. We were able to meet Hotfoot; she isn’t real fond of people so we didn’t get too close. You have to respect each dog’s personality and not intrude if a dog isn’t a “people dog.” Chris was at work at the time (the dreaded summer job) but we enjoyed meeting Kelly, his
finance, and seeing how they collect rainwater or bring water up from the lake near their cabin for the dogs. Chris has been building his cabin by hand. We saw the bottom three logs that they had been spending days on, stripping the bark and polishing each log. How many hours must have been spent building their home? It was amazing to see the care and love in its construction. The door, like many in Alaskan cabins, was solid, several inches thick, with a horn or piece of unusually shaped wood for the handle.

It was a chore to shut it.

We were able to see Mt. McKinley clearly from the Kenai Peninsula the first day we arrived there. It is rare to see the top of Mt. McKinley in the summer; usually it is shrouded in clouds. My hosts took me up in their small plane so that I could see it. It was over 300 miles away and still stunning.

Another interesting experience I had while in Alaska was staying on an island in Skilak Lake that is formed by the Kenai River. The Kenai River is fed by glacial water so it is the most fascinating blue green water I’ve ever seen. It is stunning. My hosts own a cabin there so they took us by boat and left us on the island overnight. There was no electricity, running water, phone, radio, or lock on the door (no need to). You get the picture. Shaun and I skipped rocks in the lake, took a walk, played card games, and when it got dark, fed the fire one last time and went to bed. What an incredibly peaceful, truly enriching experience!

We also took a six-hour tour of the Kenai Fjords, which included wildlife watching and seeing the glaciers. The tour boats leave Seward and go about 30 miles in the ocean. We saw otters, whales, puffins, cormorants, sea lions, etc. Staring at the glaciers, seeing the blue ice, listening to the cracking of the ice, watching them calve, I kept pinching myself to see if I truly was there, or was it all a dream? It was rainy and cold; the wind on the ocean was biting. I bundled up in my hat, rain jacket, and new gloves that I’d purchased right before we left the dock and stood out in the rain and enjoyed every second of the trip!

I spent my last full day in Alaska touring Dean Osmar’s kennel on the Kenai Peninsula.

Dean lives in an area where there are many mushers; his son, Tim, and Paul Gebhardt both live nearby. Dean won the Iditarod in 1984 and never raced again. He still runs a kennel and seemed to enjoy showing us around the kennel that is very near the ocean. He took me into his barn and up in the loft he had about fifteen sleds. He showed me the two with which he won in ’84. He invited us to come back that night and ride along on a training run. They told us to come back at 9:00 but told us that they wouldn’t run until the temperature was cool enough. So we drove back to Kasilof and did the
training run around 9:30 that night. It was my most thrilling Alaskan experience of the trip. Older dogs were put in the lead and in swing with seven young pups, around seven months of age, following them. We took the dogs out of the kennel, through a small forest, down a hill, onto the beach, back through the woods on a different trail and into the kennel. This run was no more than two miles and we stopped several times to allow the handler, Linda Joy, to train the dogs who needed it at the time. When we returned to the kennel, the dogs in harness barked and barked. They seemed to be saying, “Let’s go. We want to run farther!”

In addition to our kennel tours, we stopped by DeeDee Jonrowe’s, Linwood Fiedler’s, and Vern Halter’s. We flew over Mitch Seavey’s trails while on the Kenai and we tried to meet him but he was giving glacier dog sled rides at that time. We learned that many mushers’ summer jobs help them afford their Iditarod habits.

Before leaving Anchorage, I had to go downtown to stand at the spot of the Iditarod start. Any true Iditarod fan knows what I mean when I say, “I had to go to Fourth Avenue.” It was a crowded summer day, full of traffic, tourists, etc., but I stood and stared at the sky, imagining how a musher feels to go under the start banner on the first Sat. in March knowing what lies ahead.

As I left Alaska, I took with me my digital disc with 100+ photos, my many rolls of film, but more importantly I took my memories. I longed for the day I could go back. Alaska got under my skin like nothing else in my life, possibly because I’d been teaching with my Iditarod unit for eleven years, but maybe because it touched my pioneer roots. Alaska still has a wide-open feeling. My great grandparents came to Colorado many decades ago because it was a wide-open place. They longed for the feeling of space and a place to call your own. My great grandfather was a gold miner; Alaska was settled during the Gold Rush and there are still miners there today. Of course, I left Alaska knowing that I was applying for the Teacher on the Trail 2001 and hoping that I’d be back to interview in March.

Flying home I reflected on all that I had learned and seen: · The kennels are neat, organized, clean, and noisy! However, if there aren’t visitors or it isn’t feeding time, I’m told they are quiet. · Each dog barks like crazy to be chosen to run in the training run. They seem to be saying, “Pick me! Pick me!” · The mushers were friendly, eager to show off their kennels and dogs. They care about their dogs, their sport, and the public’s perception of it. They know that they are participating in a wonderful, unique event and it is a way of life! · These dogs love to pull! They actually smile. I have seen it myself!

A small staff in a very small building runs the Iditarod. When I used to see photos of the building, I thought it was a large place. It isn’t. But they have a wonderful store in the front. On a related topic, tourists go into the headquarters building not knowing anything about the Iditarod. Tour buses stop and people wander in. Once inside, they grow fascinated by the race records, trophies, photos, etc. Excitement fills the air!
There are many trophies and awards at the headquarters building. It is fun to see the trophies. There are different trophies for each award given. The Winners trophy is probably six feet long, maybe longer. Each winner’s name since the 1973 inception of the race is on an engraved plaque. The Red Lantern is actually a red lantern mounted on a base. My favorite was a small serum bottle on a small base; I don’t even know what it was for but, to me, it was a wonderful tribute to the original Serum Run participants.

I know that the animals are well cared for. I don’t have a doubt in my mind. I listened to Rick talk about the number of surgeries he has had done on his dogs and the different ways he has their doghouses arranged. Some dogs won’t sleep in a house so they have an inverted box lid to sleep in. Certain dogs like to eat the rocks so Rick puts out a plastic mat in their area so they can’t eat the rocks, a problem that causes the offending dog to have costly surgery! The musher considers each dog’s personality in designing its living arrangements. Every time I’m in Alaska, I learn new things – I hope your students will too as you follow the greatest Alaskan adventure!

On a personal note, “Thank you, Lauri, Phil, Shaun, Larry, and Karran for allowing me such a wonderful Alaskan adventure!”

Coming soon: A real Iditarod lesson!

Diane Nye September 23, 2000

Who Will Win? A Prediction Lesson

Posted November 16, 2000

In the weeks before the race start, my students read several biographies from the Iditarod official website. I teach third grade; the students need a lot of the vocabulary before they can understand the biographies so I talk with them often about the race in the months leading up to the start. I tell them stories about the closest Iditarod ever, when Rick Swenson was second by one second (if you don’t know the story, you should read about it; very exciting finish!), about how Rick has won in three decades and would like to make it four by winning in the new millennium, about Susan Butcher winning three times in a row (Will that feat ever be repeated? The 2001 race should be interesting), and as many other stories as I can tell them, read to them, etc.
I want my students to see that making predictions must be based on more than stories so I give them the table that I have attached to this lesson. I have an overhead transparency of the same table so that I can mark on it while they follow along on their copy. I ask them to look for patterns in how various mushers have raced over the last five or six years. They will notice that Doug Swingley has won the last two years but that Paul Gephardt has come amazingly far in a short period of time (26th in 1996 to 2nd in 2000). They might notice that Jeff King won in ‘96 and ‘98 on the northern route and stays in the odd number of places (1,3, and 7). My students notice all kinds of things that I don’t. This is a good time to discuss why a musher doesn’t always race the Iditarod every year; notice Rick Mackey was sixth in 1995 and didn’t race again in the Iditarod for four years. Juan Alcina and Sonny King were new to the race in 1998 and 1997; before that Sonny King was a volunteer race veterinarian.

Now that the students have seen the names and how the mushers have been placing, the biographies become more important. They want to learn more about the mushers. If they ask me questions about the mushers, I will answer them or send them off to our classroom wall to read the mushers’ biographies that I’ve printed off for them to read. The biographies are found on the Iditarod web site and have a table that shows how each musher has done in past races.

Each child is given a prediction sheet (about a third of a sheet of paper); they predict the winner of this year’s race, the day that the musher will arrive in Nome, and the number of dogs that the musher will have. I have to explain how many days the winners have been taking over the last few years (nine) but I also explain that they are getting closer to breaking the nine-day barrier. I also explain the rules regarding the number of dogs that are required at the end by the race rules. Each child makes their prediction in secret and gives it to me.

After every child has made their prediction, usually the next day, I plan for a time to make a pictograph of the results. The students are so excited to see who the other students chose. I tape each result to the board to make a paper bar graph. The students help me label each category when a new musher is predicted. So we’ll usually have seven or eight mushers predicted; the children will see visually how many predictions each musher has.

Before we begin our pictographs, we talk about symbols on a pictograph. They must be easy to read and draw, must be related to the race, and must be in color. This requirement makes it visually pleasing to the viewer. We discuss items related to the race: booties, mountains, husky heads, sleds, the Iditarod symbol (I), the shape of the state of Alaska, pine trees, and many others. Again, the students are more creative than I am.

The blank graph form that I give the students usually has eight boxes on it. If a musher has more than eight predictions, then we have to discuss making a symbol that would equal two votes and that if a musher only has one vote, his symbol will be a half of the chosen symbol. We discuss what goes on the top and sides of the graph. Neatness is stressed since it is a math graph. There is a lot to teaching third graders how to make a pictograph!

Then each child makes his or her own graph. The completed graphs are then mounted on construction paper and displayed in the hallway and our classroom.
When the graphs are finished, I remove the students’ predictions and put them away until after the race. When the race is over, I take them out and find out who was the closest in their predictions. In my classroom, it usually goes down to the number of dogs as to who is the winner of the prediction activity. Two or three kids will usually predict the correct winner and the date; the number of dogs is much harder to predict so it is a good tiebreaker. I usually give the winner and the runner-up a musher trading card, an Iditarod ruler, or a used bootie. Of course, the “prize” has to be something that I’m willing to part with! The students cherish their prizes. At the end of the year I do small awards for my students; some are serious and some are silly. When I give out the Iditarod Prediction Awards, the students still remember who the correct predictors were!

A final thought:

My students have access to the computers in the library; we are still rural enough that we don’t have computer drops in our classrooms yet. So during and after the race, the students like to go to the library and read the mushers’ biographies on the computer screen. Before the race, the mushers don’t mean much (mush?) to the kids but during and after the race, they are their heroes!

Prediction Lesson (PDF)

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Information on Standards and Benchmarks

Mathematics Standards 6

Understands and applies basic and advanced concepts of statistics and data analysis

Benchmarks:

Level II (Grades 3-5)

1. Understands that data represent specific pieces of information about real-world objects or activities

2. Understands that spreading data out on a number line helps to see what the extremes are, where the data points pile up, and where the gaps are

3. Understands that a summary of data should include where the middle is and how much spread there is around it

4. Organizes and displays data in simple bar graphs, pie charts, and line graphs

5. Reads and interprets simple bar graphs, pie charts, and line graphs
6. Understands that data come in many different forms and that collecting, organizing, and displaying data can be done in many ways.

7. Understands the basic concept of a sample (e.g., a large sample leads to more reliable information; a small part of something may have unique characteristics but not be an accurate representation of the whole).


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**Iditarod Veterinarians**

Posted January 11, 2001

**Dear Race Fans,**

Al Townshend, a volunteer race veterinarian, wrote today’s posting. Earlier in the year, I asked for volunteers who wanted to share stories with students, teachers, and race fans. Al volunteered and sent this for you to explain life on the trail from a vet’s point of view. These wonderful volunteers work in all kinds of conditions and last year saved one dog’s life. I know you’ll enjoy Al’s story. I certainly did. Happy trails! Diane Nye, December 11, 2000

**IDITAROD VETERINARIANS** Posted January 11, 2001

It was 1991 when I was first selected as a Trail Veterinarian on the Iditarod Sled Dog Race. There were about 75 applicants for the 35 or so positions on the trail. I was as excited as if it were Christmas morning and I was about to see what Santa had left for me. There is significant interest by veterinarians who have a desire to learn more about these magnificent athletes. Sled dogs are a superbly conditioned group of dogs that have bonded with a particular human individual who has worked closely with his or her team to develop a group that can travel quickly and efficiently over long distances in very short periods of time often under extreme weather conditions. They do this out of love and devotion for each other and a passion to pull a sled. This relationship between man and beast is what intrigues me the most. I was anxious to experience first hand, this extraordinary bond between man and beast.

The primary responsibility of the veterinary team is to assure the safety and well-being of all the dogs that participate in the race. Each dog goes through an extensive pre-race examination, which includes a complete physical exam, an electrocardiogram (EKG), and a series of blood
chemistry analyses. All vaccinations have to be up to date and each dog is dewormed. During the race it is the goal of the veterinary team to examine each dog at each checkpoint along the trail (26 checkpoints and approximately 1000 dogs equals about 26,000 examinations during the race).

The vets travel from checkpoint to checkpoint mostly by small, single engine planes with skis instead of wheels. The planes are flown by a group of highly qualified volunteer bush pilots. We land in remote native villages and a few checkpoints are isolated trail crossings in the middle of nowhere. Landings can be quite interesting as with skis, instead of wheels, there are no breaks and so coming to a stop can be an exciting event. Remote checkpoint landings are on frozen and snow covered rivers, lakes or old emergency landing strips carved out of the wilderness in strategic locations that happen to now be Iditarod checkpoints. Village checkpoints are easier landings on plowed runways.

Usually the children in the native villages are the first to greet us as we deplane. They are always excited to see new faces and experience new things. Not too much changes in the everyday life in most of the villages until Iditarod comes and it is always an exciting time for the kids. If we are lucky, the welcome committee will help us carry all our gear to the checkpoint.

It is said that there are three winter holidays in Alaska; Christmas, New Years and Iditarod. School is closed for all three (only for the first portion of Iditarod). In most villages there is much preparation by the kids. Banners and posters are made to welcome each individual musher to the village and to wish them a speedy and safe journey. Each school has a contest to see which student can get the most signatures of mushers as well as volunteers.

During my stay in the villages I have spent time in the schools speaking to the kids on whatever subject they want to talk about. It usually ranges from what it is like where I live to questions about the dogs. Many of the young villagers dream of the day they will run the Iditarod. There are many teams in the some of the villages. Dog teams are still used by some to travel into the bush. Sled dogs are slower than a snowmobile but they can be more reliable in severe and unexpected weather. As the “Father of the Iditarod”, Joe Redington, was famous for saying, “you can always cuddle-up to a team of sled dogs and stay warm, but a snow machine that won’t start is no help at all.

There are usually three or more veterinarians at a checkpoint in the beginning. As the race moves beyond that location vets may move on leaving less vets but there will always be a veterinarian at a checkpoint until the last team leaves. There are also volunteer checkers, radio operators and dog handlers at each checkpoint.

Initially there is much to do to prepare for the arrival of the first team. All supplies have to be inventoried and set out. Each vet will pack a small bag of commonly used supplies that they carry with them so as to save time and effort. A dropped dog chain is setup in an appropriate location. All dropped musher supplies are inventoried to assure that all of each musher’s shipped gear has arrived. Cooking fuel and straw for each team is placed in an easily accessible location. Trails are placed to allow teams easy access to prime resting areas. Volunteer communication experts’ setup an extensive system of communication between checkpoints so the race knows
where each team is at all times. Finally, sleeping areas are setup for the checkpoint team. Accommodations can range from a tent to space in the floor of a cabin or community center. There may or may not be heat and electricity so we have to go with the flow and be prepared for any occasion.

As the first teams arrive at the checkpoint the work begins and it is often at a frantic pace. Mushers are anxious to get their teams to their designated rest area and get them settled in. Straw, cooking fuel and musher supplies have to be picked-up and carried to the dogs by the musher. Water or snow is gathered and a fire is started. Snacks are given to each dog and straw is put out for the team. During this active time for the musher the vets spend time observing the teams as they come into the checkpoint and move to the rest area and settle in. We watch to see if each dog is bright and alert and eager to eat. Those that are not pulling and are not anxious to eat are the dogs we focus on initially. Each musher is required to carry a veterinary handbook, which is a record of each individual dog on the team. The vets record all information about the team at each checkpoint. The information is very valuable in the initial assessment of the team. If a dog is having a problem, we can determine previous treatments and ask the musher if that therapy is helping. During the first hour the team is examined and new information about each dog is recorded in the veterinary handbook. It is not just about team members having problems, but it is common for a vet to comment on how well a team is traveling down the trail. The musher cannot leave the checkpoint until a vet examines the team and signs the veterinary handbook. Teams come into and leave the checkpoint continually until the last team departs. Most of the musher’s time is spent feeding and caring for the team. If the musher is lucky there may be time to sleep for an hour or two. The vets are also getting very little sleep while teams are in the checkpoint. If you are lucky there is time to sleep after the last team leaves the checkpoint and before a plane arrives to take you to the next checkpoint. However, there is usually very little time to rest until the end of the race.

A musher can start the race with no more than sixteen dogs and must finish with a minimum of six dogs. Dogs can be dropped and are the responsibility of the veterinary team. They are ultimately flown back to Anchorage and cared for by volunteers until picked up by the musher. Dogs are dropped for a multitude of reasons. Many are just tired. Some are young dogs that are doing their first Iditarod and aren’t expected to complete the entire race or older team members that are along just to lead the team through the initial mountain range, which is tricky and essential to have an experienced leader to guide the team safely. Muscle soreness, sprains, sore wrists and shoulders are the most common reasons for dropping dogs. Occasionally there are more serious injuries, but the vast majority of dropped dogs recover within twenty-four hours of being dropped. Rest is the best medicine. There have been dogs that have died during the race. Every effort has been made to reduce those losses to a bare minimum. Any time you have 1,000 dogs watched closely for two or three weeks there are likely to be unfortunate losses. Iditarod is no exception. There is obvious stress for man (musher and volunteer) and beast, but the passion these animals have to be with and please their fellow team members and the dog driver, inspires musher and volunteer to take this journey. Life would be much less for these creatures if they were not allowed this high point in their lives.

All volunteer vets are required to spend a minimum of ten days on the trail. Many volunteer for the entire race. The first team may finish the race in nine or ten days, but the last team may take
as long as fifteen or sixteen days, so it can be a long and strenuous experience for all of the volunteers on the trail. Volunteering as a trail veterinarian on the Iditarod Sled Dog Race is an extraordinary experience, full of new and different experiences. For most, it is an honor and privilege to care for these animals and to experience the majesty of Alaska and its native people.

By Al Townshend, DVM

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NYES News

PASSION

Every great adventure begins with one true passion.

(Television Commercial) Posted January 13, 2001

Standing at our small, public library in 1985, I had a choice between two books about Alaska, one a brown, hardback book with a small photo at the top and the title or the other, a paperback with a drawing of six dogs, a sled, and a woman on the cover. Its title was Race Across Alaska: First woman to win the Iditarod tells her story. Little did I know that the book I chose would put me on the path to my life’s passion and later to my greatest adventure.

What drove me to choose a book about Alaska? I have mentioned that I am from a very close knit family. That summer my younger brother, Ron, had moved to Sitka, Alaska, as a volunteer at Sheldon Jackson College for our church. I missed him terribly. His letters told of the beauty of Alaska. I wanted to know more about this wondrous place.

I read Race Across Alaska by Libby Riddles and Tim Jones in three days in the heat of July. I remember reading it at 3:00 in the morning when it was at least 105 degrees; I was curled up under the covers with a flashlight, reading about Libby’s bravery in fighting a fierce storm. I had to know if she made it to the next checkpoint or holed up on the sea ice. My husband woke up, told me I was crazy, to throw off the covers (I was identifying with Libby so much that I thought I was freezing), and go to sleep. I kept reading. It was a fascinating book. If you aren’t familiar with the book, it had a two-column format. The outside column was Libby’s story. The inside column had facts about the race, dog care, race rules, clothing, etc. It allowed a non-Iditarod fan to understand the intricacies of the race. For someone like me who had never heard of the race, the book’s format allowed me to learn so much and to understand Libby’s story.
My brother returned from Alaska with the most amazing stories of halibut fishing in the ocean, the potential danger of falling overboard and dying within a few minutes, even if you were a good swimmer, of bears all over the island, of a 24-hour ferry ride to Juneau and spending three days there, and how he wished he had gotten to the rest of Alaska. It all sounded so unreal to me.

Two years later, I read a magazine article about teaching with the Iditarod. The light bulb went off; I remembered the book that I had enjoyed so much. I thought, “That would be a great way to teach about Alaska when we study the regions of the United States.” So I worked the Iditarod into the topic.

I’m embarrassed to say how little I did that first year. I got the teachers’ packet (which was in its earliest stage, maybe eight to ten pages) and I called Alaska each morning, wrote the information about the top three mushers on an index card, which I shared with the students and posted in the room. They kept a daily journal at their desks and when the race was over, they wrote letters to the mushers. When we received replies, we shared them with the other fourth grade classes and our principal. Writing for a real purpose? I think so. The kids loved it! I saw the potential for using the race and building skills in my students so I began to connect my required curricular objectives to the theme of the race. The next year I developed more lessons related to the race and the rest is history!

Everywhere I go, I introduce my presentation with the quote at the top of this message and I share how reading a book kindled my love for the race, my passion. This fascinates students. I encourage them to read about many topics but to delve into the topics that are their current passion. When I speak to a group, I take many books with me. The books I take are mainly race related, but I also take books on Alaskan animals, the aurora borealis, Denali, poetry books on Alaskan subjects, and, of course, my copy of Race Across Alaska.

I understand how people can get drawn into a subject and stay with it for years. My older son was in the entomology project in 4-H and he collected insects for his project over seven or eight years. We had more insect books than our public library. He passed on his passion to many other children by his infectious love of the topic. He used to stand by his insect boxes at the county fairs and talk with other children when they would admire his insects. He would teach them about the different classifications in the insect kingdom, about how to tell the difference between two insects that seemed identical, about how to catch a butterfly without hurting it and then to release it if one was already in his collection. He taught about insects in almost every middle school and high school science class that he took. He knew more than his teachers about entomology and they encouraged his passion. Now he has moved on to another love, snowboarding, which he has made into his career. He works at a ski resort, jumps for a team, and loves it.

Passion is something we, as educators, need to talk to our students about; we need to share ours with them whether it is an interest in theater, music, art, or dog sledding. We need to help our students develop their own areas of interest. It is our job to help them expand their world, to educate them on other topics, and to introduce them to new passions. Who knows where your influence might lead that quiet girl or boy in the seventh hour or third grade class?
If someone fifteen years ago had told me that I’d be going to Alaska for a month to be on the Iditarod Trail, I would have died laughing. I did not know where reading a book would eventually take me. I am planning on this being the greatest adventure of my teaching career! So far, it has been!

I am a very lucky Iditarod teacher. I work with many great teachers. I work with four other teammates who are all following the race this year. I can’t say enough good things about them. Each one started following the race with me at a different time and each does things in their classroom differently. We each pick and choose the activities that best support the learning objectives and standards that we have to cover. It is a joy to watch our third grade students on the playground play “Iditarod” which means one student holds the handles of a jump rope and six or seven other kids hang onto the rope and listen to the commands of the musher. The beauty of all of us teaching with the race is that often this playground game brings together students who would not normally play together at recess. In addition to my teammates, the specials’ teachers all collaborate with me to support the Iditarod unit being taught in my classroom.

For many years I have been working with the technology teachers to create Iditarod checkpoint illustrations on the computer. Debi Kirkpatrick has been our computer teacher for five years and she embraced this unit; she has learned a lot about the race and helps my students understand the concepts if they are confused. I will provide detailed instructions on the checkpoint project in another posting. She has taught them how to word process their poems or stories in interesting ways and add graphics.

A couple of years ago the music teacher, Chrystal Cottrell, asked how she could support the Iditarod through music. We used the songs and music from Iditarod: The Last Great Race to Nome: Curriculum Guide by Shelley Gill to teach the students songs. Last year when we were doing a program for the parents she wrote to Hobo Jim and his publisher and got permission for our students to sing his songs.
Nancy Mowers, our new art teacher last year, helped out by having the students paint Iditarod related pictures. When I was preparing to interview in Alaska, she held a student art contest in which the pictures were auctioned off as a fundraiser. This involved getting judges to choose the winners, obtaining parent releases to sell their child’s work, displaying the art, and then running the silent auction. She shows the students videos, talks to them about the medium that they could use, and then guides them through the process.

It has never worked into our PE and third grade curricula to have the PE teacher do something with the race. But I’m still thinking about how this could work. I’m thinking about the Inuit games that I’ve read about. Ah, a new adventure for my students and me.

How can an elementary teacher or school survive without a good media specialist? I came to Running Creek eight years ago with a love of the race. There were no materials in our excellent library on the race itself and we had a couple of books about dogs that mentioned sled dogs. Each year our librarian, Judy Shue, has added materials. We now have many student library books, an extensive set of multiple copies of different levels of reading materials, videos, maps, etc. After I was named Teacher on the Trail, she asked what books she could order so that students throughout the building could do research on Alaska and the Last Great Race; together we compiled a list of books and she purchased them for the students’ use. I have heard from so many good media specialists about the Iditarod related activities they are doing in their schools; it is a joy to know that schools are so fortunate to have such dedicated, caring professionals as you!

Time and energy are required to collaborate with colleagues. These seem to be two things teachers don’t have enough of – but when we collaborate our students are the winners! They receive support for their learning in a variety of settings. Each teacher adds to the whole picture for the children. If you haven’t thought of this way to extend the learning in your classroom, please consider how you could do it with your curriculum requirements and those of your specials’ teachers. I am so grateful to each of these teachers who have added to my students’ education.
Before and during the race I ask my students about their heroes and we talk about what makes a person a hero. At first their answers are very flip, right off the tops of their heads. When I ask them to think about what makes a hero, their answers change and they become more precise in what makes a hero and who meets their criteria.

So I ask, “What characteristics make a hero?” I talk to my students about my heroes, people who have overcome great odds, like my friend, Travis, who suffered for nineteen years with cystic fibrosis but never had an unkind word to say about anyone no matter how much he was suffering. He always was working to improve himself, the world and to help others. I tell them about my grandmother who cared for my ill grandfather for almost two years when she was half his size; she refused to leave his side and wouldn’t even consider putting him in a nursing home. He died at home surrounded by people who loved him, thanks to my grandmother’s love and determination. I talk to them about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ghandi who changed the look of our world with their beliefs and leadership, all the time keeping the influence on non-violent change. These four individuals have all overcome great obstacles.

As the students list characteristics of heroes we chart them. We add on to the chart during our Iditarod unit. I tell many stories related to Iditarod history during the race. I use several books with stories about the mushers as resources. My favorites are Mary Hood’s book, A Fan’s Guide to the Iditarod, and Lew Freidman’s book, Iditarod Classics. We discuss the 1977 controversy over who won the race (Dick Mackey’s lead dog crossed the finish line first but Rick Swenson was the first musher to cross. Rules stated that the first lead dog to cross is the winning team so Dick was awarded the win by one second, the closest Iditarod finish in its history.) We discuss the bravery of Libby Riddles in 1985 of braving a blizzard to become the first woman to win. The blizzard of 1991 when five mushers were at White Mountain together, two mushers walked to Nome during a nasty blizzard. The others felt it was too risky, that they were endangering the lives of their dogs, they went back to the checkpoint. This brings up much discussion. Each of these stories brings out other thoughts about what makes a hero: courage, overcoming odds, meeting challenges head on, humility in victory and defeat, great love for others, etc.

After the race, many students agree that the mushers are their heroes. The beauty of the Iditarod is that it is not just the winning musher who is a hero. All the mushers who have preserved against the weather, the terrain, the distinct personalities of a dog team, and the distinct personalities of the other competitors are heroes. The mushers who have fought back after disappointments, such as being forced to scratch by dogs who refused to run or from personal injuries, are heroes. The mushers who have dedicated their lives to this type of lifestyle, most
realizing they’ll never been a Rick Swenson or a Susan Butcher but who keep training dogs for the love of the sport are heroes. The mushers who work full-time jobs in order to keep a kennel full of amazing athletes and train at the same time are heroes.

I feel that we live in a day and age without a lot of good role models, heroes, for our students and children. Activities like this encourage children to think about who they emulate. Personally, I’d rather see six or eight elementary students playing Iditarod on the playground with six “dogs” all holding onto a jump rope with a musher barking commands at the back, than the high-five’s and ball spiking of a football player. I’ve seen the cooperation of the children playing “Iditarod” and the individual glory of the football fan imitating his favorite player’s touchdown routine. Which behavior helps the child more in the long run? What, as a society, do we teach our children? Who do you want your students to look up to as heroes? Exposing our students to other cultures, other types of sporting events and other ideas gives them a chance to develop new heroes.

What I’ve described doesn’t even start to touch the canine heroes – loyalty, leadership, ability to listen and follow directions, love, teamwork – there are many more discussions once you begin to talk about the dogs!

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Writing to Mushers? Send Stamps!

Posted February 1, 2001

Hello, fellow teachers.

First of all, let me say how much I’m enjoying hearing from so many of you. My time at school with my class is growing short and I’m getting more and more e-mail messages each day; please forgive me if I don’t reply immediately.

It came to my attention that many teachers and students write to mushers, a great idea! My students did it many years also. However, think about a musher who gets 200-500 letters, most of them asking many questions. I can’t imagine how overwhelming that would be for a musher who has dogs to care for twice a day, 365 days a year. Then think about the cost involved in writing those replies, paper, copying, stamps. . . .
You can help this situation… first of all, make sure that your students ask questions that they
don’t know the answers to or can’t locate the answer through the Iditarod web site. Asking how
many dogs a musher finished the race with is silly; students can find that answer on the final
daily update. Asking which is that musher’s favorite checkpoint and why or what was the hardest
part of this year’s race are more appropriate questions. I’m sure it would help if your class writes
one class letter to the musher. I’ve done this before and had each student create a small piece of
artwork to create a decorative border for the group letter.

Second… please send a self-addressed, self-stamped envelope. The postage alone must be
horrendous! You could even add a few extra stamps in your letters for all the teachers who might
not think about enclosing a stamp or two.

Third, if the musher has a web site, your students might want to generate a class written e-mail.

Finally, please inform your students that the musher might not write back right away or at all.
They are busy, trying to take care of all the dogs in their kennel, training the ones that were left
home during the Iditarod, catching up on their family’s events while they were away on the trail,
etc. Please remind your students if they are writing to a musher, who lives overseas, it may take a
long time for the letter to reach the musher. Often I would receive letters back from the mushers
near the end of the school year or after our students had gone home for the summer. I used to
photocopy those letters and give them to the students in the fall… they loved hearing from the
mushers! It didn’t matter that it was a few months later.

Thanks to Tony at Plettner Kennels for bringing this matter to my attention. I hope these general
guidelines will aid in your letter writing.

NOTE FROM EDITOR: If you are having students write to mushers, please review our updated
information about this project.
I teach third grade in Elizabeth, Colorado. I have developed my unit based on the Iditarod over the last twelve years. As I’ve mentioned in earlier postings, when I started following the race with my classes, there weren’t many materials available for teachers so I’ve developed my own ideas. The first thing I do is look at the state and school district standards for third grade; then I look at what my students are expected to be able to do at the end of third grade. I base my lessons on our district’s targets. Here is an overview of what I do with my students:

I create a classroom climate of all Iditarod. I take down all the posters, artwork, and student work that have been in the room. I cover my long bulletin board, the entire back wall of my classroom, with one color of background paper. I usually use black or blue because that makes photos stand out. Next I put up my Iditarod posters, maps, general race information, terminology, race rules, the list of the mushers, newspaper clippings from old races, and so forth. I have collected a few stuffed huskies over the years and they usually sit on my filing cabinet all year long. This year they have been going with me to presentations along with a miniature sled and many books. My goal in the room conversion is to build interest in the race early on.

Over the years I have shared my enthusiasm for the race with our Specials teachers (Art, Music, Computer, PE). They support my curriculum with lessons and activities in their classrooms. I have done a posting on this collaboration; I feel that this type of cooperation is critical as the students are learning about the race in many settings and with different teachers putting different emphasis on various parts of the race.

My students’ first big project is based on reading for information and choosing the most important information from the text. The goal is for each student to create their own computer generated checkpoint illustration; the same thing could be done with the student drawing or painting what they think the checkpoint and the trail look like. The directions for this project will be provided in my next posting.

I have the students create their own journals. In the journal is basic race information, a map of Alaska with the trail marked on it, a race map that the students write on each day, a chart to keep track of the mileage from Anchorage and mileage remaining to Nome and a current “Meet the Mushers” page where I give the students information about several of the mushers. They have a journal cover to color and we make a construction paper cover. I find it helps to have a journal in which to keep all of their other Iditarod materials during the unit.
Next we do the prediction lesson that I’ve already shared. The key to this lesson is that it is based on how the mushers have done in the previous races. Of course, there can always be surprises. Aily Zirkel is rated a rookie but won the Yukon Quest race last year in her third or fourth attempt at that difficult race. Many would dismiss her in this Iditarod; she’ll be one worth watching.

Our computer access to the race is limited to the media center and computer lab. Someday our classrooms will have access, but for now the students can only access the web site in these places or at home. We read about the mushers by using the mushers’ biographies. I have already highlighted several mushers’ race history in their journals so they know several mushers to read about. The computer teacher and I introduce the students to the web site so they can learn to navigate the site; this year’s new button on the left format will make it easy for the students to get around.

During the race two students from each third grade classroom get the update of the race’s progress twice a day. Each pair goes back to their classroom and shares the results. I usually have them start with number ten and read up to number one; at first it is a humdrum experience in monotone voices. As the race progresses, the students’ voices become more animated. It is great fun. Once a day we record the names of the top three to five mushers, where they are on the trail, how many dogs they have, and the weather conditions in their journals. I usually call the race headquarters every morning to get the weather and any unusual happenings during the race. This year I’ll try to be providing you with that information from the trail. My students are practicing their cursive, leaving spaces between words and neatness in their writing while they work in their journals.

Following the race and putting this information in written form generates a lot of questions from the students. “Yesterday this musher had 15 dogs and today he only has 13. What is happening to his team?” or “Why was such and such in fourth place yesterday and he dropped down to fifteenth place today?” We discuss what could be wrong and why we don’t know. When the mushers start taking their layovers is when it really gets interesting. The students notice the shifts in the standings right away. The race updates are posted in and outside of my classroom. Many of the older students come down to check “their” mushers’ progress every day.

My students also read many tradebooks about the race. Over the years my teammates and the media specialist have ordered books at different reading levels. We have class and small group sets of many race related titles. These are shared among the different classrooms starting a few weeks before the race.

I have my students write many different types of writing during the course of the race. We write poetry, stories, informational pieces, etc. I’ll share the Northern Lights poems that my class created the last two years in a future posting.

My lessons during the race focus on the Iditarod theme but are geared to the needs of the group of students. I have that year. I change my lessons each year; one that I’ll be sharing with you soon covers the dictionary pronunciation key. I decided to teach that to my third graders because so many of the Iditarod materials have the pronunciation for the words in the text; my
students didn’t know how to read these words or the pronunciations provided. This has proved to be quite successful.

Our math in the journal consists of keeping the miles from Anchorage (addition) and the miles left to get to Nome (subtraction); I give the students a blank mileage chart in their journal. I don’t tell them how to fill the chart out. We just talk about it on the Monday after the race starts. “The mushers left Anchorage and went to Eagle River. How many miles is that?” I say. So in the first column we put the number of miles already traveled from Anchorage. At the top of the second column I have printed 1,161 miles on the southern route. We discuss that if the race is 1,161 miles long and they’ve only gone _____ number of miles when they get to Eagle River, how many miles would be left. The kids use paper to do all their addition and subtraction. After a couple of days of this, they figure out that it is addition and subtraction. I use an overhead transparency of the same chart to write the numbers and I use two different colors to write the mileage; I use red and blue (Iditarod colors). The entire addition column is in one color, the subtraction column in the other. That way if a student is absent they can come back and find the information they need to update their chart quickly. This gives my students daily addition and subtraction practice and they do it all without grumbling. I will post a copy of my chart with directions in a future posting.

I read aloud Gary Paulsen’s work, monitoring and adjusting his language as necessary. I have selected the passage that was published in Readers’ Digest several years ago as its sections are the right length for me to read during each day’s read aloud period. The students love his blow-by-blow descriptions of the hysterical and serious events during his rookie race.

My students, in teams of two, create paper dogs, which we put on the wall outside of our classroom. The dogs are hooked to a paper sled (almost life-sized) and the students are responsible for measuring the distances from the sled to the wheel dogs, up each set of team dogs, to the swing and lead dogs. String serves as our gangline. We label each part of the sled and the team for the younger students and visitors to our school. The dogs, just like my students, come in different colors and sizes. Each dog is named by his or her creators; dog names are put on the dog’s collars. I’m lucky to have a long hallway to do this project and teammates who don’t object if the team runs under their bulletin boards.

I will give more directions for many of these activities in future postings. I have been enjoying hearing from many of you and I hope this gives you an understanding of who I am as a teacher.
My students’ first big project is based on reading for information and choosing the most important information from the text. The goal is for each student to create his or her own computer generated checkpoint illustration; the same thing could be done with the student drawing or painting what they imagine the checkpoint and the trail to look like. I have copied off the information from the web site’s “General Information” section about each checkpoint and the trail leading in and out of that checkpoint. I put these on individual sheets so that each child has their own. The students can be assigned a checkpoint or they can draw them out of a boot or hat, like the mushers do for their starting bib numbers.

Either a parent volunteer reads, or I read, this information to each student individually while the student reads along; this is time consuming but worth the effort. There are many terms that the student will not understand so we explain it to the child. Then we ask them what the most important information about the trail and checkpoint would be; they highlight that information on their copy. When I feel that the child has a good idea of what it looks like, I show them the information in Iditarod Country by Jeff Schultz. I just got this book last year so I’ve only used it twice in showing the kids their checkpoint information. It is surprising how much they retain from the text. The child then sketches what he or she thinks the checkpoint looks like; I encourage them to do a quick sketch just as a reminder when they are in the computer lab.

In the computer lab the students use whichever drawing program we happen to have in our computer lab that year; the checkpoint illustrations have certainly changed over the years. It is interesting to me how some students choose to create a daytime illustration and others night. Of course if you want to incorporate the aurora borealis, you have to select a night scene. This project gives each child a chance to include the knowledge they have of the race; some include people, dogs, checkers, vets, etc., and others do a simpler setting picture.

I call my classroom newsletter for families “Nye’s News”. For a few years I had the children write an article for Nye’s News from the trail. They predicted who would be winning the race when it came through his or her checkpoint and imagined the details of the race at that stage. That newspaper article went at the bottom of the checkpoint picture that each child created in the computer lab.

For several years I have had the children write about their checkpoint. What do they see when they are in Grayling? Shaktoolik? Takotna? Each child is an expert on his or her checkpoint. The writing that is incorporated goes underneath the checkpoint illustration.

When the writing and illustrating are done and edited, these are printed out in the computer lab. They are mounted for display in the third grade hallway. They are hung in checkpoint order down the hallway. As the front runners pass through his or her checkpoint, each
child tells the class about the checkpoint and trail and then hangs a paw print under the checkpoint illustration in the hall; that alerts the entire school to the leader’s progress.

This is one of my students’ favorite projects. The final product is something that they keep when the race is over. They like being the expert on their part of the trail. It also creates more interest in other parts of the race. They want to do well because they know the project, upon completion, will be hung in the hallway. Our school halls are very busy with parents and community members using the school for meetings, classes, etc., and the students know that many people will be looking at their work.

I developed a set of information for the Northern Route and a set of for the Southern Route. I keep them in two separate file folders so I can always just get the one I need for that year; it has worked well for me to organize my information that way. As long as the checkpoints remain the same, I’m okay!

I hope you and your students will enjoy this project.

Happy trails,

Diane Nye

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The Teacher on the Trail program was started in 1999. I applaud the thinking of the first teacher on the trail, Finney, and the Iditarod Trail Committee for working together to create this wonderful, educational program. I became involved as soon as I learned about the program. I received an application for 2000 Teacher on the Trail (TOTT) in the mail. After looking it over, I decided that I couldn’t apply for 2000. So I looked at the requirements for the 2000 TOTT and I began working on my application packet. Later I received the application for 2001 and just added the necessary information in my application.

I have had several messages asking about applying for TOTT 2002. The three finalists for TOTT 2002 have already been chosen and they will be in Anchorage interviewing the week before the race starts. I know that they must be getting very eager and anxious. This is the same process that Marie Corkhill, Jeanie Hicks, and I went through last year; it was great fun for me to meet other teachers who love the race as much as I do.
First of all, if you are at all interested in applying for TOTT 2003 or in future years, I would encourage you to read everything in the application packet before you make your decision. I would not have undertaken this challenge if I were not serious about applying. I spoke to my principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent before I went to my school board with my proposal. Then I spoke to my town board, the county commissioners, and several community groups to see if I had enough support in the community. I worked on my entire application for eleven months before I submitted it for consideration.

In my application, I had to tell how I would fund my project, have support letters from my administration, my parent/teacher organization, and the school board pledging that I could have the time off needed to serve as TOTT, personal references and a biography. I also included curriculum development activities I was involved with, committees I was serving on at the time, and showed involvement in community activities. My resume, my philosophy of teaching with the Iditarod in my classroom, many lesson plans, and photos of my students learning about the Iditarod were all in the packet along with many letters of support from students, parents, and community members. It is important, as an applicant, that you are honest with yourself. If you have health issues that would prevent you from getting in and out of a small plane, don’t apply. If you have fears of flying, heights, dogs, etc., don’t apply. If the thought of sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor of a checkpoint bothers you, don’t apply. Eating foods you may not be acquainted with upset you? Don’t apply.

Be honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses. Don’t sell yourself as something you are not. That will only get you into trouble. Make sure your application tells who you are right now, not the person you think you will become if you are chosen as TOTT. If chosen, you won’t have any time for self-development. All of your energies will be on helping others teach with this great race as an important, integrated curricular unit.

My advice to any future applicants would be to watch the web site to know when the next packets for applying for TOTT 2003 will be available, get the packet, read it carefully, follow the deadlines exactly, and realize that it is a huge commitment but well worth it if you are chosen.
Dear Teachers,

When I started my Teacher on the Trail quest, I thought about all the obstacles that a person must overcome in life. I think that I have mentioned that two of my children have asthma and both of my sons have had to learn to deal with learning disabilities. I have seen how each of them has handled their health and educational difficulties in different ways. All this thinking also got me to realize that everyone has obstacles in life. Anyone who says that his or her life is peachy keen makes me suspicious. Yes, for the most part, life is grand … but every once in a while, we are all thrown for a loop with an illness, a death, a financial burden, other losses, etc.

How do humans overcome these obstacles? Some people retreat, some reach out, some ignore, and there are many other ways to deal with their problems, some good and some not so positive. I’ve been talking to people and asking them to share their stories. Since this is the Iditarod, I’ve been asking mushers to share their stories. I’m working on other stories to share with you. This one shows what one musher did when she faced a major obstacle … being lost on the trail; I can’t imagine a more frightening thought. You will notice that this was a short training run, not an Iditarod story; you will probably need to make that distinction with your students. I have heard and read stories of mushers being lost for many hours on the Iditarod. I hope you and your students will enjoy this story. Thanks, Jill, for allowing me to share your story.

Diane Nye

Lost on the trail? What does a musher do?

In December of 99 I took my 6-dog team to Nicolet Forest in Wisconsin, for a week of dog sledding with a number of other mushers. There are many miles of marked/groomed trails, and I was pretty familiar with most of them.

The last day of our trip I wanted to go out further, to a hill, which was infamous amongst our musher friends.

Anyway, we headed out on what seemed to be a well marked trail to find this hill. It had been very cold all week, and that day was no different. It was early morning and maybe -20 degrees F.
I found the hill, but when I tried to find my way back I realized not only was the trail I saw on the map groomed and used, but there were dozens of crisscrossing trails which weren’t marked. I bumbled around for an hour or so, getting more and more worried. I had foolishly not told anyone where I had planned to go, and no one would miss me until that evening. I hadn’t watched too many landmarks since I thought the trail was a simple loop. After stopping and realizing I was very lost, and might get very cold, I said a prayer and hiked up my team. My main lead dog is a male malamute named Zach. I decided to trust him, and let him pick directions at each turn or crosstrail. Within a half an hour I recognized where we were, and shortly after I saw we were on a familiar trail. He purposefully led my 6-dog team the 8-10 miles right back home!

This same dog did something similar more than once when I wasn’t quite sure where we were, but with stakes less high (it was warmer and there were people I could have asked for directions). Zach also helped find a lost 5 year old boy who was also named Zach, and helped calm the boy who was too scared and shy to talk to me very much. The boy walked ahead of me with his hand on my dog’s shoulders, until we got back to the parking area and his worried family.

He has been a great dog, one of those once in a lifetime dogs!

Take care,

Jill and the Trailblazer Team

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Sometimes in life we are blessed with meeting people who have such incredible stories to share, who make such an impact on our lives. This story is from a man who also loves the Iditarod. He agreed to share his story with us as an example of someone who has overcome a great obstacle in life! Think of the lessons that we can all learn from Robert.

Happy trails,

Mrs. Nye

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Hello everyone!

My name is Robert and Ms. Nye has asked me to tell you about something wonderful that happened to me nearly three years ago. But first I will tell you a bit of Iditarod history that sort of ties in with my story. On Mar. 22, 1998, Brad Pozarnsky crossed under the burled Arch on Front St. to finish his Iditarod. In doing this, he became the first Red Lantern winner to attend the awards banquet; though he was so tired he doesn’t remember all of it! I learned of this last year at supper at a mutual friend’s home the night before the Beargrease Sled Dog marathon, which starts in Duluth, MN. If you would like to learn more about Brad and the Iditarod, check out the web site of the sixth grade class that helped support his effort at http://www2.grandforks.k12.nd.us/iditarod/iditarod.html

By the luck of the draw, I was Brad’s Beargrease Ballast (similar to Idita-rider) at the start the next day. But I think the neatest coincidence was that about the time Brad was going down Front Street in Nome, I received a call from the University of Wisconsin Health Clinic in Madison, WI, telling me to get there as soon as possible as it was my turn to receive a transplant. You may wonder what kind of transplant I received. It was a kidney/pancreas transplant, which means I received both a kidney and a pancreas. You probably wonder why? Well, for that answer, we have to backtrack to when I was ten years old and follow through a bit up to the present. When I was ten (fourth grade), I became a type 1 or insulin dependent diabetic. This means the pancreas does not function properly, often not at all. If it is still partially functioning, it is called type 2 diabetes. The pancreas produces insulin and other fluids, which the body uses in the processes of metabolism and digestion.

Diabetes can also cause other problems with vision, circulation, the nervous system, and kidneys. It often affects different people to different degrees, and advances in research and treatments have progressed dramatically, so often these complications are less frequent and/or less severe. Over time, I suffered some from all of these problems, most severely from retinopathy (visual loss) and kidney failure. The function of the kidneys is to filter the blood, removing the toxins that are produced during normal body activity. As my kidney function progressively decreased, the level of the toxins in my blood increased until they reached a point where I had to begin dialysis.

Dialysis is a process which artificially imitated the filtering process. It is not a complete imitation, but it does keep people alive. As with diabetes, some people respond better than others to this treatment. But before 1963, this treatment was not even invented.

About the same time (actually a few months before) I started dialysis I went on a transplant waiting list. Currently there are over 70,000 people waiting for a transplant of some sort. Many organs such as livers, hearts and lungs are transplanted, though kidneys are the most common, and the waiting list for them is the largest. Why are these lists so large, the wait sometimes so long? One reason is that certain factors must be correct of the transplant won’t work. These include genetic characteristics and in some cases the size of the organs. Another reason is the shortage of available donors. Unfortunately, most transplanted organs must come from a person who has suffered a life ending accident. The exceptions are currently some liver and kidney transplants, though research is trying to find ways to help eliminate this situation.
Being on a waiting list is a strange thing. You must always be ready, always be available, always be able to be contacted when “your” organ is available. You carry a beeper, which only the transplant authorities know. You have an answering machine, perhaps, and maybe a second beeper and/or cell phone. You tend to not travel very far from home. You always have a suitcase packed and a list of other things you use you don’t want to forget. You make arrangements with friends and neighbors to look after your home and mail because when you get that call, you don’t want to waste time contacting the post office to hold your mail. Also, you don’t always know how long you will be gone, and some things may not wait until you get home. A transplant may mean you are in the hospital as little as 7-10 days, but sometimes there can be complications that make your hospital stay longer, occasionally much longer.

We are almost back to the start of my story, but first we have to go through a couple of false alarms. Sometimes, because of possible problems, more than one person is called when an organ becomes available. The second person is behind the other on the waiting list and is called a standby, just like on some airplane flights… In my case, two kidneys were available, but there were possibilities for problems with the first two recipients, so four people were called, and I was the fourth on the list. As it turned out, the first person was okay, and got a transplant. The second was too ill to have the operation, so the third on the list also received a transplant. That was a very long night, as I did not find out for sure until around six in the morning, and had been waiting at the hospital since early in the evening. I had a second false alarm, but it was far less traumatic. I received a call, but was told to get ready, as it was not certain yet. Just over an hour later, another call came and I was told tests showed the kidney was not viable, so there would be no transplants.

Now we are back to the start of this story, where Brad makes a trip down Front Street to finish his journey and I answer the phone to begin one of my own. It was a bit of luck that we didn’t have to go through the whole beeper/cell phone routine. My mother and I had spent the afternoon at the local collegiate bicycle races and had stopped at my home to crate the dogs and run my blood sugar test before meeting some friends for supper, planning on staying less than fifteen minutes. Then the phone rang and it was Marilyn, my transplant coordinator telling me she had some good news, and how long did I estimate it would be before I would be at the hospital in Madison. (I live in Champaign, IL.) Well, about then my mind took a bit of a jump, sort of like that first jump into hyperspace in Star Wars. Everything seemed clear but it was moving so fast it was also a blur. Then I called our kennel, where we had made arrangements because of the very likely possibility that we would need to leave our dogs on short notice when the kennel was closed. Then over to the neighbors with keys to my condo and mailbox. Then I grabbed the pre-packed suitcase and my list to fill the other one with. Then uncrate the dogs and out the door.

We stopped at my mother’s house so that she could finish packing and make more quick phone calls. Next stop was the kennel, where we left two dogs who were happy to be there (a sign of a good kennel, in my opinion), but had no idea that it would be a month before we saw them again. We turned north on highway 51 and headed for Wisconsin. Then on Interstate 39, which later joins with I-90, making several short calls on my cell phone as we went. Around midnight we got to Madison and found the hospital, which we had visited once before for my interview to get on the waiting list. We went in the emergency entrance where they were expecting me and up to my room.
The next six hours are even more of a blur as I went through the preparations for my operation. I know I took a shower (the last for a while); blood was drawn for lab tests. I took IV medicine and drank two gallons of this less than enjoyable stuff that was necessary to get me ready. I’m sure there was more, it seemed like there was always something to do. By the time I went to the operating room, I was so tired I wasn’t sure if they would need any anesthetic.

The next thing I remember is waking up in my room and everyone seemed happy. Then I remembered why. I was fairly fuzzy-headed and only vaguely aware of much of the activity, such as blood pressure checks and other routine nursing activities, and that I was hooked up to several things, I was very aware, however, of the two small oxygen tubes in my nose and the tube that went down my throat. I was also still under the influence of the anesthesia and felt fairly comfortable and decided that I was happy too, I talked some, the surgeon and some other doctors visited. I dozed a lot.

The next thing I remember was being woken up (3 am) and asked if I felt like walking some. I was thinking maybe to the bathroom door and back and said, “Sure.” Then I asked how far and was told, “Oh, down the hall,” I said I’d try and got up and started. I was unsteady at first, but once I got going it was easier than I expected and actually walked down two halls and back to my room. The walking was encouraged, even required to a point. It helps stimulate your circulation, which aids healing and also builds confidence, which helps make you feel better which is a sort of self-fulfilling thing. It is generally agreed that a good attitude will help you through times of less than ideal circumstances, so getting out and about, as long as it wasn’t overdone was encouraged. Activity combined with plenty of rest is usually the best way to heal.

The next day I tried to go to class. At the hospital where I received my transplant, part of your recovery includes attending a week of daily classes which teach you about your transplant, medications, how to tell if something is wrong as well as how to try and keep yourself healthy. The first day, however, I was too uncomfortable and tired and had to leave the class and return to my room. I slept well that afternoon.

The next day I managed to last all the way through the class, I felt their classes were very important. You are the person most likely to notice a change. You are the person with the highest interest in your well being. Why shouldn’t you be the person in charge of monitoring your health, if you know enough to understand what is or could be going on? Then you will know enough to get help when you need it, not after it is too late. So we learned the basics of the transplant process and what it involved. We learned some things specific to our particular type of transplant and to other types, as well as things common to all.

Usually, at the beginning of the class, we went around the room and introduced ourselves, told what transplant we had received and where we were from. During one of these, I found out (much to our mutual surprise) that another patient was from the town where I had gone to high school and was actually related to people I went to high school with.

Another thing we learned about was interpreting the lab results of blood tests. One thing you learn to get used to with both dialysis and a transplant is a lot of blood draws. There is no other way for the doctors to know certain things that indicate how you are responding to treatment or
even if you need treatment. After you go home, you regularly have blood work done. This is three times a week at first, though it eventually decreases to once a month as your condition stabilizes and remains stable. In class you learn the normal ranges of various blood components that are basic indicators of transplant stability. If these levels stray out of those ranges, you report them and the doctors will decide and tell you what to do next. That may range from running a test tomorrow to packing up and getting to the hospital FAST. These tests are a front line monitor/defense against the thing that can make a transplant worthless — rejection. When an organ is transplanted, the recipient’s immune system recognizes that it is from someone else. It treats it as it would any other thing it finds that is not a normal product of the body it belongs to, the same as it reacts to a flu virus, or a cold or an infection. It tries to destroy it.

There are two ways medical science tries to prevent rejection from happening. One is the process of matching I mentioned earlier when I was talking about the waiting list. Part of what is matched are a type of genetic marker, which seem to be indicators that the immune system used in determining whether an object is a foreign body or not. The most common of these is blood type. The better match is of these factors (some are even “perfect” matches, matching all the known factors), the less of the other deterrent to rejection is needed.

The other way rejection is prevented is through the use of medication. These medicines are called immunosuppressants or anti-rejection drugs. These drugs make the immune system less effective. So it does not destroy the transplanted organ. The oldest and most common of these is prednisone, which is used for many other things besides transplants. Other medications have been developed to help with this task, and many are much more specific, or more closely targeted to prevent the immune system from attacking the organs instead of preventing it from attacking diseases such as infections. Lessening the immune system’s ability to fight disease is probably the most harmful side effect of the drugs. Others include increased sensitivity to sunlight, which increases your chances of sunburn and skin cancer. Some of them can affect your nervous system and some can affect your digestive system. That is why the medications and their effects are studied by the recipients. Understanding the medications helps you to use them properly and appreciate their importance to your survival.

Their importance and their bad side effects are why the doctors try to find the correct dosage for each person. Every person is a little different in how they react to the different drugs. Some are more effective in one person than another. The goal is to find a dosage that controls the immune system enough to prevent rejection but is not so high that the side effects are too harmful. Some times this goes quickly, sometimes it doesn’t. Occasionally, as a person heals and gets stronger, or perhaps some minor (or occasionally major) problem arises. The dosage must be changed.

As more and more years of successful transplants accumulate, more and more knowledge about how to control and adjust the medications and their effects is learned and can be used to make the process quicker and easier in the future. Research is developing better medications to help with this too. Currently a transplant recipient will have to take (and monitor) these medications for as long as they live.

We reviewed many subjects more than once. We had the transplant floor’s head pharmacist cover the various medications we were taking. As well as the anti-rejection drugs, we all took
medicines that would help to prevent infections. Most of these we would take for three months. We might have to take them again if we got certain types of infections. One day was mostly spent on healthy diets, and exercise was something that was encouraged. Some of the recipients went home soon after this week. Some took longer to get stable enough that it was safe for them to leave. I was one of the longer ones, staying three weeks. After that, I stayed at a motel in town instead of going home for another week, checking with the hospital staff regularly.

Also on the same floor were people who had come back to solve a problem that occurred after they were home, sometimes for years. I was to become one of these patients, twice during the first year after my transplant. The first was a disease that only affects people with weakened immune systems called cytomegalovirus or CMV. To stop this took a very strong medication, a form of chemotherapy that didn’t exist until around fifteen years before I used it. Later that year I was back in the hospital again, this time with a problem that required surgery, but was not as potentially life threatening as the CMV or rejection would be.

When I first left the hospital and went home, I still had to return every week. After a time remaining stable, the time between these visits was increased. When I returned to the hospital and then left, it was back to every week, then the visits became less frequent. This same process went on with blood draws, though they started at a rate of three a week, and will continue to be done at least once a month as long as I live.

Eventually I made it to the one-year anniversary of my transplant, what recipients refer to as their birthday. I sent an email thanking my surgeon and one announcing the anniversary to many friends. If you make it a year without having a rejection, the odds that your organs will function well for a long time increase and keep increasing as time goes by. The threat of a rejection is always present, so you must remember to do labs and interpret them and to watch for the other signs that something might be changing that could cause your transplanted organ to fail.

It has been three years now since my transplant and because of the thoughtfulness and kindness of my donor and his family I have had a chance to do many things I would not have had the chance to do. I rode in Brad’s sled and I’ve driven my own with my two dogs. I have seen the start of the Iditarod and attended the National Hot Air Balloon Championships. I have also spent much time with old and new friends doing much more “normal” things which were just as rewarding. I have had three years full of ups and downs that I would very likely not experienced without my transplant. It is truly a wonderful thing and I am thankful for the opportunity to tell you about it. If you would like to learn more about transplants or organ donation, a good place to start is the National/Kidney Foundation website located at http://www.kidney.org.

Thanks, Bob, for sharing your amazing story with us.

Diane Nye
Most of us rely heavily on the updates to the race results. The Internet access to the race has changed the way I teach the unit. Twice a day two students from each room go to the Media Center and get the updates. We aren’t fortunate enough to have the Internet access in our classrooms; I envy those of you who do. The two students who obtain the updates bring it back to the room and do a David Letterman style announcement… “In 20th place, we have _____. In 19th place, we have____…” The kids love it! They can’t wait to see who is in the lead. Of course, usually they’ve figured it out by who has already been named. Great fun! Since we do the prediction lesson before the race starts, my students know who they are pulling for.

This year I’ve been told that the race results will have a new look. I know that many of us teach the students how to understand the race results before the race starts. The Junior Iditarod results will be posted this weekend using the new computer program. That is the format you should teach your students before the race starts. I hang a huge poster in the hallway of my school, explaining how to read the race results. I’ve numbered every line and then have an explanation off to the side. That way parents, other students who haven’t been exposed to the race, visitors to our school can understand the updates that I post in the hallway. I started posting them years ago when my former students would ask me, every time they saw me, where their musher was. So now I post them and many students each day stop and read the results.

I just wanted to give you a warning about the new look to the results … be prepared; that’s what the Iditarod is all about!
I applaud you first grade teachers out there who want to follow the race with your students. First grade must be the most exciting grade to teach because your students are like sponges, ready to absorb everything. Many teachers have written asking me how to use the race with first graders. I went to the experts, other first grade teachers. Here are the ideas that one of you shared with me:

I have many children’s books about the race and have a bulletin board with the map and enlarged materials from the Teachers’ Guide which I have in a 3-ring binder. I sometimes put the Iditarod website on the TV screen and discuss how the race results look. There have been some related sites which young students can log onto and follow the information including Alaskan animals (Don’t all kids love animals? It doesn’t matter what grade level you teach; that is a sure hit!) Mostly I tell them what is going on since much of it happens when we are in bed. I have related math problems to follow (booties for 8 dogs, 16 dogs, and 4 get dropped, cans of dog food for Martin Buser’s present team of dogs, etc.) and we follow several leaders to keep track. We learn about time to the hour and half hour. We do journal entries. I teach map skills and letter writing. Last year we found a website which used very large print and many pictures which were helpful to my students. Very often what I do with my students depends, each year, upon the interest of the students and the excitement generated. Last year’s class was VERY interested and many followed the race at home. Many of my students have aged (not me though!) and are interested in what is happening, and the race has been a very popular topic around the school.

In rereading the last three sentences of Susan’s note to me, I was struck with the realization that we all could have written those statements, first grade, third grade, middle school … we all know that the kids’ excitement drives this unit; I’ve seen how the excitement builds year after year in my school; it is fun to listen to the kids in the hallway teach a new student about the race. I hope that you can have that experience someday; it shows you the misconceptions that students get. I always wonder, “Where did that come from?”

Earlier this week before I left for Alaska I gave two school presentations in a nearby community. The school librarian happened to be the mother of a student I had six years ago. She told me that her son, a high school freshman, still follows the race and talks about me every year during Iditarod. While I was speaking, I looked toward the back of the room and saw this handsome, strapping young man sitting at a table, intently taking in every word! Yes, his mom had found he was on a free hour at the high school and had invited him to come to my presentation. Afterward he helped me pick up my books, dogs, and my Iditarod related artifacts. What a nice surprise for me and reaffirmation that what we do can impact our students for many years!
Writing Ideas

February 28, 2001

My students write many different pieces during the Iditarod, depending on the skill levels of my students at this time of year. I usually have them write a story, at least one type of poem that can be published, and we write in their journals every day. I will explain each of these below. Over the years we also made alphabet books based on the Iditarod to share with the kindergarteners and first graders; I’ll explain that in a future posting.

Stories:

My students love to write Iditarod stories. However, it sometimes ends up a litany of the checkpoints, “The main character left Anchorage on the first Saturday in March. He went to Eagle River, loaded his dogs in a truck, and went to Wasilla…” By the time the author gets you to Nome, you aren’t awake. I have really had to work with my students to get them to have a problem and solution in their story and to realize that the story might take place in one checkpoint without ever mentioning the others.

One of my favorite writing assignments involved having the writer take the point of view of someone, other than a musher, involved with the race. The story could be told from point of view of the lead dog, a newspaper reporter, a race official, a vet, etc. My students really enjoyed this and I found out what they had learned about the race, its rules, etc.

Poems:

I hated poetry when I was a girl. I love it now. I work with my students and understanding poetry all year long. We have a poetry notebook, have a poem of the week, and reread our favorite poems every Friday.

I’m always on the lookout for good poems that enrich my students’ language and their understanding of the world. I would love to add to my collection if you would like to send me your favorite poem.

With the Iditarod, I teach cinquains (five line poems, first line is the noun or topic and is only one word, second line is two words, both adjectives, the third line is three verbs, the fourth line is a four word phrase about the topic, and the fifth line is a synonym for the title) and each student picks his or her own topic related to the race to write about.
Iditarod

exciting, icy

mushing, passing, barking

miles of frozen tundra

Last Great Race

To encourage good word choice in writing, I teach the students the noun-verb format. Stress with your students that in this format words cannot be wasted. The critical elements of the race are reduced to two word combinations. It can also be adapted to verb-noun, if you like.

Flying sleds

Shouting mushers

Drifting snow

Howling wind

Ice cracking,
mushers yelling,
dogs barking,
sleds slipping,

That’s the Iditarod.

Here’s what I hear when I race:

Dogs barking,

Mushers yelling,

Sleds swishing,

Ice cracking,

Snow drifting

Wind whistling,
Storm howling

See what I hear?

3rd Grade

We have written descriptive paragraphs after each child lists as many describing words about the subject for each line. After brainstorming the subject and adjectives for each topic, the child can then combine them into descriptive phrases. For example:

The warm glow of the checkpoint cabin

The incessant howling at the passing team

The thrill of victory shown on a musher’s weary face

The Iditarod at its very finest.

I also love to have my students create acrostics. Again, they choose the subject matter but must master the acrostic format. We write a class acrostic together at the end of the unit on a topic that the students choose. Some Examples: (2nd Graders)

**Moose**
Moose can kill dogs
Out of the race
Ophir is a checkpoint
Snowshoes to walk in the snow
Elim is a dog who ran the Iditarod

**Puppy**
Playful to me
Useful all the time
Perfectly perfect
Prize to me
Yelps when she’s happy

**Musher**
Must run
Use silly tricks
Some need to win
Haw means “turn left”
Eat trail gorp
Rush to win
Some have to scratch
My students write a class poem, which involves a lot of give and take cooperation to agree to the lines. Some students are vested in one line or phrase and it is hard to come to group consensus. But I enjoy the process and find that the students are incredibly proud of the class poem.

\textit{Northern Lights}

\textit{Nightly occurrence}

\textit{Observe with your heart}

\textit{Radiating reflections}

\textit{Tremendous displays}

\textit{Hope to see}

\textit{Exciting amazement}

\textit{Remarkable lights}

\textit{Not affected by humans}

\textit{Lights up the sky}

\textit{Iridescent}

\textit{Ghostly images}

\textit{High in the midnight sky}

\textit{Top of the world}

\textit{Sun gases cause spectacular sights!}

When writing this poem, I could see how much my students had learned in a ten-minute video and a brief discussion about the northern lights. They suggested this topic for our class poem and I cringed. I thought to myself, “They don’t’ know enough to write an entire acrostic!” I’m glad that I didn’t share my reluctance with them. I helped them with one word in the poem; we had to consult the dictionary for it. Can you guess which one it was? The students can up with all the other concepts and words.

I often e-mail my parents who have access to e-mail so they are up to date on classroom projects. I e-mailed this one to the parents. This poem was written the last day of school before Spring Break. When I returned back to school, one of my students was carrying a picture frame. Inside was our class poem, superimposed over a picture of the Northern Lights. What a thoughtful,
supportive parent. What a wonderful connection between home and school. You can tell that this parent believed in honoring students’ work. That poem has hung in my classroom ever since.

The next year, the students wanted to do the same project. I was disappointed, thinking that they couldn’t do as good a job as the previous class. Here is their poem:

*Night sky blooms with color*

*Overhead in northern places*

*Reigning over the sky*

*Touching the darkness like snakes*

*High up in the atmosphere*

*Exhilarating beauty reappears nightly*

*Red, like blood, is a rarity*

*Near our hearts*

*Liquid – like lights of multicolors*

*Intense, lofty displays of nature*

*Graceful, glowing gases*

*Hovering electricity over our world*

*Tempestuous twitching waves*

*Silent swirls surge above amazed minds*

My students write in a journal every day; we travel the progress of the three leading mushers, where they are located, how many dogs they have, the weather if we can access it, etc. The kids love this. I use it as a good time to practice their cursive handwriting.

Many other teachers use the journal writing as a time to imagine what the musher, who the child has chosen, is doing that day.

Answer to the acrostic question – the word I helped the kids locate? (Iridescent)

*I hope you and your students have a fantastic time writing during the Iditarod. I’ve seen my students do their best writing of the year, descriptive, full of great words with a good variety of sentence structure and length, etc.*
What an exciting evening in Anchorage! The mushers’ banquet was when the mushers’ starting positions were announced. We sat near a musher who kept waiting for his name to be called. It was fun to watch when he was finally called. He was excited with his starting position.

Over eighteen hundred people crowded onto the floor of the Sullivan Arena, the ice hockey arena where the Anchorage Aces play. Before the food was served, fans could mingle with mushers and their sponsors and get autographs. During the mushers’ speeches, fans could also get autographs by standing along one wall. The mushers walked by and signed books, posters, t-shirts, etc. It was great fun! If you are an Iditarod fan, you need to attend the mushers’ banquet at least once!

Some interesting quotes and memories of the evening were:

Mike Williams of Akiak, Alaska gave the invocation. He spoke in both English and his native Y’pik tongue. He talked of the many cultures in Alaska and “how these dogs bring all of us together.” He talked of the challenges of living in Alaska but said, “We have hope.”

There are six past and present champions, representing 16 of the 28 Iditarod wins, entered in this race.

It was noted that this is Rick Swenson’s 25th running of the Iditarod.

The Honorary Mushers were honored; Dr. R.W. Van Pelt of Fairbanks was a veterinarian in the Fairbanks area for many years. Rick Swenson spoke on behalf of Dr. Van Pelt’s family, honoring the many years that he has served sprint and distance mushers from across the state.

Don Bowers was honored for his service as an Iditarod Air Force pilot, a finisher, and his contributions to the web site and for his support of the Iditarod through his educational efforts. His sister, Ann, spoke of all of Don’s friends who have come forward to tell her of the things he did for them and how badly he is missed. She also told how Bruce Moroney is dedicating his run to Nome to Don; Don had mushed the Moroney’s dogs to Nome in his first race.

Many sponsors were thanked, the entire race sponsors as well as individual mushers’ sponsors. Everyone in the room realized that no one makes it to the Iditarod Trail without a lot of help from family, friends, and sponsors.
As the mushers’ numbers were called, each would go to the stage and say a few words (or more). Some were very brief and others more long-winded. Pedro Esteban Curuchet from Argentina thanked Alaska and said, “My country is your house,” which drew a big round of applause.

Morten Fonseca from Denmark explained the mushing in his home country was very hard because, “Go to the police if you want to have more than four dogs.”

Rick Mackey said, “Let’s go before we need a raft out there,” referring to the warm weather in Alaska and the melting that is taking place.

“Three-peat,” was the word that Doug Swingley said he would only say once, which was tonight.

Mike Williams, “The Sobriety Musher,” has collected 50,000 pledges of sobriety over his years as an Iditarod musher.

“Thanks, boys, for dragging me along,” was Dan Seavey’s message to his son and grandson who are racing, making them the first family to have three generations running on Iditarod. In addition, Tyrell Seavey was the winner of the Junior Iditarod and he will be running the first team out of the starting chute on Saturday.

David Straub talked about having the same fifteen dogs as he had last year; his comment was, “We ain’t good but we’re slow.”

Charlie Boulding thanked “my wife, Robin, sitting over there, my kennel manager, Robin, sitting over there, my handler, Robin, sitting over there, and my cook, Robin, sitting over there.” Are you sensing the wonderful sense of humor most Alaskans have?

Curtis warned the other mushers to stay away from his dog drop bags because they contain his wife’s wonderful cookies and that he would be quite protective of them.

Sonny King said, “Don’t judge a person by their accomplishments but by their friends.” Do you agree with that statement? Why or why not?

Raymie Redington mentioned that two of his sons are entered into the race and he said, “I have a couple of boys so I have someone to chase.” He is carrying the message of Parkinson’s disease for an Anchorage teacher, Susan Johnson, who is retiring after 20 years of teaching because she can no longer deal with the physical aspects of the job. She spoke from the podium about the cause of fighting Parkinson’s’ disease.

Bob Morgan, who has had a hip replacement, urged “all physically handicapped, let your spirits ride with me.”


Jeff King paid tribute to Tyrell Seavey and his daughter, Cali King, who finished in the closest Junior Iditarod ever last Sunday. He reported that it is harder to be a parent than running the race
yourself. Jeff drew bib number two so he will be the first musher following the Junior Iditarod winner. He reported that before his first Iditarod run in 1981, someone wise told him, “The next two weeks will contain some of the very best moments of your life and some of the very worst moments of your life.” What do you think that means?

Several mushers thanked their dogs, one naming every dog individually.

It was a wonderful night to be at the Sullivan Arena. It was warm when we went inside and snowing when we departed.

I don’t know about your students but, if they are like my kids, they are always asking, “What if…?” It seems to be third graders’ favorite pastime. So this activity, developed by a middle school teacher in Florida, is designed to get the students to answer their own questions using the race rules. This activity builds familiarity with the rules before the race starts (or during). I can see this as a small group activity or done individually. For my third graders, I’m going to rewrite the rules in kid friendly language. Next year I’ll do this with my students early in my unit. I bet your students come up with some great interpretations of the rules. After learning about the race rules and following the race, your students can write their own scenarios. Have fun!

**Race Rules**

**What if. . .**

Directions: Read the following scenarios and decide what should be done based on the rules. Be prepared to share your opinions with the class and back up what you suggest with the actual rule or rules involved. (Hint: You might want to write down the rule number that you are using to justify your answer.)

1. You are crossing the Farewell Burn. Suddenly, your sled hits a tree stump, tossing you over the handlebars as the team comes to an abrupt stop. Another musher comes up behind you and offers to help you fix your sled. What should you do and why?

2. Your sister offers to let you use her Great Dane as a part of your team. She used him to pull a sled on the sand dunes in Miami. He’s a great dog, big, strong, and fast. Should you take her up on the offer? Why or why not?
3. At Rohn, you spent 6 hours resting the dogs and working on your sled. Since you’ve been there so long, you decide to take your 24-hour stop, figuring you can leave in 18 hours and not waste the time you spent working and resting. What’s the problem?

4. Your dogs get into a terrible fight and another musher runs to help you separate them. Are you both now disqualified? Why or why not?

5. Screamer, your lead dog, gets a deep, bad cut and the vet tells you she needs to treat it with some antibiotics and a muscle relaxant. Why is she waiting for you to think it over and give her an answer?

6. You’re lost. You have an ELT. Why would you want to seriously think about turning it on before doing so?

7. Unfortunately, your dogs seem to have eaten something that’s making them sick and you decide you have to scratch. When you go to the Iditarod officials to ask them for money to help get your dogs home, what are they going to tell you?

8. Even before the race, what must mushers do to ensure that their dogs are healthy?

9. Sally’s team has a run in with a moose; when you come up on her, she is trying to gut the moose. What do you have to do according to the rules and why?

10. Stan has identical twin dogs. When the twin he is using for the race gets hurt, he tries to be sneaky and puts the other twin in instead. Will he get caught? Why or why not?

11. DeeDee gets sick and offers her dogs to Martin Buser, who is down to nine dogs. Should he take her up on her offer and why?

12. Your birthday is Feb. 29th. You will be 17. Should you be making plans to race in the Iditarod next month?

13. Someone comes into the checkpoint with an expired dog. What happens next to them?

14. Jim gets held up on the way to the musher meeting on March 2 and never gets there. Will he still be in the race?

15. A friend goes out ahead of you and builds a great, warm fire and has dinner ready for you the second night on the race. Other mushers see you but don’t stop. What will happen when you get to next checkpoint?

16. Your dogs get chilled crossing an icy stream. One gets sick and dies. What happens next?

17. Uh, oh, you overslept and missed your start time. Will you still be allowed to race? Why or why not?
18. On the trail, you come on someone hurt and face down in the snow. You drag them onto your sled and tie his dogs to the front of yours. What will happen to you when you get to the next checkpoint?

19. Sitting at Safety, you hand your musher diary to Jeff King to read. What happens?

20. At White Mountain, you’re so tired your handler winds up signing you in. What’s going to happen?

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**Writing Letters to Me**

*Posted March 8, 2001*

If you wrote to me from the link at the bottom of the Teacher on the Trail site during the first three days of March and didn’t get a reply back, it is because I had e-mails forwarded to me from the staff at the headquarters. Some of your e-mail addresses were deleted in that process. I’ve read all the letters but can’t reply. I’m very sorry. Please resend those messages to me at teacher@iditarod.com Also, I’m out on the trail and don’t always have phone access to send in my postings and messages. Please be patient. I’m having a wonderful time on the trail and will have many messages to share about the trail when I return. Thank you for your interest in the race!

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye

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**Problem Solving at Yentna**

*March 8, 2001*

At Yentna, the halfway point in the Junior Iditarod, much problem solving took place. These situations give us many opportunities to talk with our students about life in Alaska and life on the trail.

The fourteen to seventeen year old mushers had to take all of the necessary supplies for the trail. There were required supplies identical to the Iditarod mushers; have your students find that list on the web site and see if they agree that those items are necessary. They could not receive outside assistance from family members or bystanders; they could consult with race officials if they needed additional help. Most, however, did not do that. They turned to another source of aid; they turned to other mushers. This gives us a great chance to talk to our students about how
that competition is important but so is good sportsmanship. Why would the Junior mushers turn to each other? What could some of these situations be? How could the kids help each other?

Weather turned bad after the mushers left Yentna Station, on the Yentna River. What could “bad weather” mean on the trail? Hint: Airplanes could not be flown into Yentna. Brainstorm ways you would try to get out of Yentna if you had to get out, like the newspaper reporters that were stranded with us.

What would you do if you were one of 33 people inside a cabin with three small outbuildings? Write down things you would do if you were stranded there for one day, two days, or longer. In the group were people from all walks of life: we had a veterinarian, several reporters, a dog team owner, a teacher, a nurse, a musher’s wife, and several others whose jobs I don’t know. There were ham radio operators, race officials, etc. Would this information change the activities you would do while stranded? Hint: The cabin of Dan and Jean was very well stocked for food so that was not a concern.

The five children are home schooled and help run their home, which is open to visitors year round. Since they are right on the Yentna River, they sell snowmachine gas and have visitors at all hours of the night and day, wanting to buy gas. Write about how your life would be different if you lived in a remote cabin in Alaska as a child. Hint: Outdoor activities are huge for the kids in the cabin.

The rest of the story:

The snow broke for just an hour or so at mid-morning and planes were able to come in a pick us up. We rode out in small planes with two or three seats in addition to the pilot. We took survival gear; the planes were equipped with enough gear for the passengers and pilot to live for two weeks if needed. I rode out on the third plane of the morning that carried those of us associated with the Junior Iditarod; one plane left after ours. All of the visitors at Yentna were able to get out later in the morning by making three different plane trips out. Dan and Jean were awesome hosts and they were prepared to keep us for as long as possible.

Thanks, Dan, Jean, and kids!

Diane Nye
I arrived at the Skwentna checkpoint the day of the restart in the late afternoon. That was Sunday, March 4, 2001. I have heard of the Skwentna Sweeties and they are awesome. There are about 18 volunteers who serve as the Sweeties cooking the food and serving the volunteers and the Darlings who are men who flattened down the snow on the river before the race began, help organize the straw and food drops for the mushers, and take care of all of the organization with the dogs on the river. The Sweeties provided us with two awesome meals. Joe and Norma Delia own the cabin where the volunteers eat and the mushers can rest. They open up their homes and their hearts to the Iditarod volunteers, mushers, television crews and fans.

Think about this: If you were the musher checking into the checkpoint after the 70+ miles run from Willow, where the restart was held this year, what would you do first? Make a list of the seven or eight most important jobs the musher has to accomplish at the checkpoint. Organize the checkpoint routine as to the most important to the least.

Yesterday, Jeff King came in first; Dan Giovanni came in a few minutes later. Martin Buser followed them, and DeeDee and Sonny King came in a few after that. There was a short amount of time between teams coming at the first; after the first few, the others came in much quicker. It was amazing to me to watch the interaction of the musher with his team while doing the other chores. Some of the mushers act with intense precision; they did one step, then their second step, boom, boom, boom. no goofing around. Other mushers did not act so quickly and wasted time with their lack of organization, looking around for something in their sled bag.

In talking with the volunteers here, I found that they came from around the country; several were from Washington, sunny southern California, Wyoming, and several Alaskans. They came from different occupations such as high school principal from Washington and volunteer jobs such as a Scoutmaster. These people take vacation time and fly at their own expense to volunteer for the Iditarod.

The best part, according to one of the volunteers, was that it was magical to be a part of such a wonderful event that you’ve heard of most of your life. He told me of the intimacy of watching a musher work with his team, of the intensity of the mushers with their dogs, and the relationship between mushers and dogs. He commented on how the mushers were thankful for the help.

**JOBS THE MUSHER DOES:**

1. The musher must listen to the checker upon arriving at the checkpoint. The checker sends the musher to the right area to part the team. There other volunteers send the musher to the place to park their teams. The volunteers here had bales of hay all organized and the food dogs were in
alphabetical order down the center of the area. The musher also declares if he or she is staying in the checkpoint or traveling on through.

2. The musher must park the team by setting the snowhook and straightening the team out in front of the sled.

3. Many mushers unhook the tug lines but leave the necklines on. Some mushers might take a dog’s harness off. The reason I heard for this is if the dog is known to chew on his harness, the musher I will take the harness off.

4. Next, many of the mushers broke open the bales of straw and distributed some to each dog or team of dogs.

5. Feeding the dogs came next. I watched one musher give the team some dry food mixed with something else. Then he got hot water that the Darlings had cooking for them. He fed the team a small scoop of food on the hay. Then he mixed more food and fed each dog in a pan. When done, he stacked the dog pans up and repacked them in the sled. After they were done, this musher gave every dog a chunk of meat. So his dogs had food four times that evening.

6. The musher takes booties off and checks for injuries in the food area. They lay the booties out and at this checkpoint, the volunteers picked them up for all the mushers. One of them asked me to tell that they collect them and distribute them in their hometowns to the school children.

7. The mushers might eat something or lie down and sleep.

8. What other steps did you think of for the check-in procedure?

9. Which steps do you think are the most important?

10. Discuss with a classmate or a team of classmates why you ranked your events in the order you did.

11. Do you think that the mushers all use the same routine?

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye
I have to tell you that I’ve had a wonderful time on the Iditarod Trail so far. I’ve been at Rainy Pass for the last 48 hours, stuck there due to bad weather. I have been watching the mushers check in and out, taking care of their dogs, working with the vets, and trying to get some rest.

When most of the mushers went out to Rohn, the volunteers at the checkpoint started the clean up process. I helped with the dropped dogs. They howl this sad, mournful howl as if they are crying to their teammates to come back. They also loved it when I’d go up and play with them. Some of the dogs have shy personalites and they just hang back so I didn’t pet them. I try to watch each dog’s reaction to know if it was safe to approach them or not. I also helped the handlers and vets load the dropped dogs into the airplane to fly back to Anchorage to be cared for by the help in Anchorage or with their mushers’ handlers.

I was also in on the cleanup process of bagging up the trash, raking up the straw that the mushers’ used with the dogs, moving the mail up to the edge of the runway so that the planes could load up the mushers’ goods that are being mailed back home, etc. It is a great thing to work through the entire process at a checkpoint.

I am heading down the trail today; the race is progressing incredibly quickly. Remember that there are mushers who haven’t taken their 24 hour layover yet and mushers who have. It may take a day or so for the race leaders to come to the front.

Enjoy following The Last Great Race.

Diane Nye, 2001 TOTT

Thursday 3-8
Thursday Night ~ McGrath

Posted March 8, 2001 - Thursday night in McGrath, Alaska

My schedule took an unexpected detour earlier in the week when I was stuck at Rainy Pass due to bad weather. The pilots couldn’t fly in and out of Rainy Pass so I stayed there for 48 hours. It was an incredible experience for me to see everything there.

When the weather broke, I returned to Anchorage for Wed. evening. I waited for an airplane out to the trail all day Thursday, arriving at McGrath at about 6:20 last night. I spent my time in the checkpoint headquarters, learning about their satellite link and computer system, watching the mushers come in and out of the checkpoint, meeting the nicest people. I am overwhelmed by the kindness of all the Iditarod volunteers who have come from across the US to volunteer and the locals who cook and care for the mushers and volunteers.

It was great for me to see Ryan Redington check in last night. I was in Rainy Pass when Ryan came in with ten dogs, preparing to drop one immediately and started talking about scratching. The race officials and vets there talked to him about taking his 24-hour layover there and then making his decision when his dogs had rested. Eventually Ryan decided to keep going in the race. I was on the banks of the Kuskokwim River last night when he pulled in, asking about the competition, where Danny Seavey was, who else was here, where his dad and brother were.

I just heard that the final musher to check in is coming down the river; his headlamp light can be seen for a long way away and the village kids have been watching for each musher. He is several hours behind the last musher to check in.

Last night we were treated to a guitar and flute band, which played for those gathered in the checkpoint for over an hour. Local people brought pan after pan of food inside the checkpoint for the mushers and volunteers. There are letters from school children addressed to the mushers and taped to the checkpoint wall. There is a large bulletin board with flags for each musher stuck to the wall at the last checkpoint the musher was at. There is a board with times in and out from the last checkpoint so that the volunteers can tell when to expect the next musher. On the door is a list of the mushers on their 24-hour layovers and when they leave they are scratched out.

The checkpoint last night was totally chaos and entirely fun. Everyone was following the race leaders through the Internet updates. There is a satellite link for communications and wireless computer link to the McGrath School.

Today the plan is for me to move to another checkpoint, maybe Iditarod and then onto Grayling. If the weather comes in, I may stay in McGrath. Freezing rain was for forecast for today. Everything with the race volunteers is dependent on being able to fly to the next checkpoint or stop in a volunteer’s schedule.
Did you know that booties come in different sizes? I didn’t. After many years of learning about the race, I found out that the mushers order booties in several sizes. Here are the measurements for each size:

- **X-Small** 3 inches wide x 4.75 inches tall
- **Small** 3.5 inches x 5 inches
- **Medium** 4 inches x 5.5 inches
- **Large** 5 inches x 5.75 inches
- **X-Large** 5.25 inches x 6.25 inches

On a piece of paper start at the center of the bottom of the page, use a ruler to measure the correct sizes and draw the rectangle for the extra-small bootie. Using a different color, draw the small one, using the same bottom line as the extra-small one. Keep measuring for the medium, large, and extra-large booties, switching colors for each. Label the correct size.

The costs for the booties decrease as a musher orders more booties.

- 1-25 $1.50 each
- 26-100 $1.25 each
- 101-500 $1.10 each
- 501-1000 $0.97 each
- 1001 and up $0.85 each

Figure the costs for a dog team with 16 dogs. Find the rules on the website concerning booties and multiply the number of booties needed and the cost to order them.

I appreciate the help of the folks at www.akgear.com for their permission to use the sizes and cost of the booties for use by teachers and students.

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Hello Teachers and Students,

I am now in Grayling, Alaska. I was in McGrath this morning, listening to the mushers there discuss their strategies about the race. Two mushers scratched there this morning due to tired dogs. I flew over this morning from McGrath over Ophir but missed Iditarod, Shageluk and Anvik. The weather was not good for flying; there was a low cloud cover and snow. Coming into the Grayling airport, we hit a patch of strong winds and our small plane about flipped. But the pilot did a great job to upright the plane and landed it safely at Grayling.

The first thing I did was come to David-Louis Memorial School to visit the fifth and sixth grade class of Joyce Conatser. Joyce had written me months ago inviting me to her classroom. Her students were very polite and happy that I came to visit; they were just as excited to go to PE. I was then able to visit some of the other classrooms and see many Iditarod bulletin boards around the school.

The leaders are expected to come into Grayling this afternoon so the tension here is building. Doug Swingley is the musher expected to arrive first. He is coming off his eight hourlayover on the Yukon so he will probably not stay. That will be a disappointment to the third grader, Douglas, who was hoping to meet Doug Swingley. Grayling is a village on the banks of the Yukon River. It is a beautiful area with the Unalakleet Mountains in the background.

The first musher into town will bring all of the school children out to welcome them here. The middle school students I talked to are excited to watch them come through town. It is the biggest excitement of the year, they told me.

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Comparisons between the Iditarod and other Races

I have many reading materials based on sled dog racing. One, from an old reading basal reader, is called “Robin and the Sled Dog Race” about a girl running a three dog race. After reading that text I have the students create a Venn diagram with the similarities and differences between the race Robin was running and the Iditarod. Since the girl has only three dogs, it is a sprint race so that allows you to discuss the differences between sprint, middle and long distance mushing.

If you read Stone Fox with your students, compare it with the Iditarod. You can also show the video of Stone Fox and compare and contrast it to the book. If you follow the Junior Iditarod or any of the hundreds of other races across the US with your students, have them compare and contrast it to the Iditarod.

If you follow the Yukon Quest, have them compare the two premier long distance races. If you don’t know much about the Quest, there are several good books available about it. It has many differences and is just starting to get the publicity to inform fans about the race.

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Can you believe that the Junior Iditarod is already this weekend? Be sure to talk to your students about the Junior Iditarod. It is a fascinating race for teenagers 14-17 years old. It starts on Saturday in Wasilla, 40 miles outside of Anchorage, and the teens race out about 80 miles to Yentna over much of the Iditarod Trail. They take care of their dogs the entire way, stay a required ten hours, and race back on Sunday. This year there are fifteen entered in the race as of this morning; of the kids who registered early, there were seven young ladies and five young men. One family with three Junior mushers just signed up so you’ll have to check the list of contestants to see who they are.

The dogs will have their vet checks tomorrow morning (Friday) in Wasilla. The mushers have their mushers’ meeting tomorrow evening. Then they start their race on Saturday. I am thrilled to say that the Iditarod web site will be posting race results as the race is happening so your students can monitor the Junior mushers progress during the race if they can access the site from home. I will be on the trail sending you reports as well. I’m hoping to get photos so your students can see the Junior mushers in action.

This website has a list of the mushers entered, the race rules which includes the mandatory gear that the Junior mushers are required to have.

There is a wonderful book called Iditarod Dream: Dusty and His Sled Dogs Compete in Alaska’s Junior Iditarod about musher Dusty Whitamore in the 1995 Junior Iditarod. The text and photos are both outstanding and my students were amazed to see that Dusty was a normal high school boy. He walked to school, watched his high school team’s basketball games, and had a normal high school life except that he had his own team of dogs, cared for them, and trained them for the Junior Iditarod. If you don’t have this book in your Iditarod collection of materials, it is a must have book!
Happy Trails,

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail

Information about pictures:

Musher Jennifer Ramsey prepares to leave the starting line of the 2001 Jr Iditarod. The start and finish line is on the golf course at Settlers’ Bay in Wasilla.

Jr. mushers have to ship out their food drop the same as the Iditarod mushers do. At the turnaround checkpoint at Yentna Station, the bags are lined up waiting for the mushers to arrive.

Hannah Moderow tends to her dogs as a reporter sets up his video camera for an interview.

Fact and Opinion

posted March 10, 2001

Give your students a newspaper or magazine article based on the Iditarod. Be sure that some opinions are in the article.

Have them write down three facts and three opinions from the article.

If the article you have does not contain any opinions, then have the students write three opinion statements about the race.

You could have the students debate the opinions presented. Depending on the opinions presented you could have all kinds of opinions argued.

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
One of the projects that my students enjoy is creating an alphabet book at the end of the Iditarod unit. First we look at many different formats of alphabet books. Our school library has many different formats of alphabet books on different subjects. Of course my students read many of these books when they were younger so they have experience with the format.

Then we brainstorm Iditarod related words that go with each letter of the alphabet. First the students do this individually and then we create a class list. Each student will eventually create his or her own final list and book. Creating a class word list helps the students generate more ideas and words; it is amazing how brainstorming does that.

When we have several words for each letter generated, then we talk about how the book should look. We discuss the format of a book; each child decides if they will put one letter per page or two. We discuss if the printed text should go at the bottom of the page or the top. How the big alphabet letter is arranged on the page is also considered. I require my students to do some type of illustration and must have color included, either the entire illustration or in outlining. However the student chooses to start the book, he or she must be consistent throughout the book. We make our book covers out of card stock, laminated construction paper, wallpaper samples, or any other materials durable enough to last.

Upon completion of the book, the students share their copies with the kindergarteners or first graders. This enables my students to share their work and the younger students to ask questions about the Iditarod. It helps my students see what they could have made clearer in their writing.

Teams cooperating on the writing and illustrating could also do this project. Or each student can do one letter of a class book.

Have fun with Idita-alphabet books!

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Each week I have a pretest for all students. If the students do well, they can accept to do the challenge list for that week. During Iditarod week I repeat their normal spelling routine. However, all the words are race related. The challenge list are harder words as those students need more challenge in their spelling skills.

During the week the students usually practice their spelling words in a phonics based spelling workbook. This week I provide the students with practice in spelling sentences and configuration (how the words look). The students enjoy a break from the workbook routine and enjoy learning words that they are using in their writing during the Iditarod unit.

I also have my students play a game called “Sparkle” which is a listening and spelling game. Each child in a line spells one letter of the word. The person who is after the last letter of the word spelled says, “Sparkle!” which means that is the end of the word, and the next person is out of the game. We call it being “sparkled.” Therefore, students sit down or are out of the game for no reason other than where they are standing. If a student misses a letter, they also sit down. If they didn’t hear the word, they have to sit down. The winner is the last person standing.

The final test is on Friday. The students usually do well during Iditarod week because it is the words that are important to them. Attached are lists of the words I use with my third graders.

Spelling Lists:

1. sled
2. dog
3. alaska
4. snowhook
5. weather
6. mushers
7. checkpoint
8. trail
9. moose
10. attack
11. icy
12. racing

1. blizzards
2. storms
3. harness
4. checkpoint
5. toughen
6. husky
7. dangerous
8. struggle
9. distances
10. Eskimos
11. mountain
12. officials
I must teach my students how to find the main idea in a reading text. To do that, I choose texts about the Iditarod and Alaska. I retype paragraphs of various lengths and leave two or three blank lines after each one. The students then have to write the main idea sentence.

The important thing that I have found with the main idea is that students usually expect it to be the first sentence but it can be any sentence in the paragraph. When creating my own worksheets, I choose paragraphs that have the main idea in the middle or the end of the text. It is easier to find main idea sentences at the beginning and ending of the paragraph; it is hard to find one in the middle.

I have many of my own books on these topics but I also use books from the library since my students aren’t acquainted with those books.

Diane Nye,

2001 Teacher on the Trail
Scavenger Hunt

Use the Iditarod website to fill in the blanks or answer the questions.

1. Who is the only Iditarod musher to win the race three times in row?

2. Predict who might be the next person to do that.

3. Which Iditarod champion is from Clam Gulch, Alaska?

4. Who holds the record for the slowest Iditarod win?

5. _______________holds the race record for the fastest win. He set the pace in __________ (which year).

6. Aliy Zirkle, an Iditarod rookie, won what other long distance race. Which race is that?

7. Jon Little holds a job as a ________________________________.

8. How many mushers came from states outside of Alaska?

9. How many of those are rookies?

10. How many mushers came from other countries?

11. How many of those are rookies?

12. Which family is the first ever to have three different generations to enter the Iditarod
(grandfather, father, and son)? ____________________________________________

HINT: Be careful; this one is tricky.

13. Paul Gebhardt was raised with a time-consuming lifestyle before starting with dogs, also a time intensive lifestyle. How was he raised? ____________________________________________

14. Wally Robinson works for another musher. Who? ____________________________________________

15. Dan Giovanni was involved with the Iditarod in an unusual way. Explain how he got involved with the race. ____________________________________________

16. What is his nickname? ____________________________________________

17. Mike Williams runs the race for a cause. What is it? ____________________________________________

18. Sonny King became a musher after __________________________________. He is the only musher to win two different awards. What are they? ____________________________________________

19. Jessica Royer was Montana’s Race to the Sky 500 winner when she was ______ years old.

20. Morten Fonseca trains at what kennel? ____________________________________________

Who is the well-known musher there? ____________________________________________
I am required to teach my students to construct a time line. So I have chosen to do that with Iditarod related events.

I give them a blank time line with the events listed across the top. They have to arrange them in the correct order. I decorate my worksheet with a paw print stamp and a dog head stamp.

**Iditarod Time Line**

Directions: Arrange the dates in the correct order to construct a time line of important events in the history of the Iditarod Sled Dog Race. Write only the year and the underlined key word(s) on the time line.

**EVENTS:**

1925: Serum run from Anchorage to Nome
1973: First Iditarod Race to Nome held
1995: Doug Swingley sets his first race record (First non-Alaskan to win the race
1910: Iditarod trail developed to get gold out of the Interior and supplies in to the miners.
1990: Susan Butcher wins her fourth Iditarod
1985: Libby Riddles becomes the first woman to win the race
1991: Rick Swenson wins his fifth race
2000 BC: Inuit dogs hauled transport sleds
Diane Nye
2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
One of the unsung groups of Iditarod volunteers is the trail sweeps. Their primary job is one of safety, I learned today. They follow along with snowmachines behind the last musher. They pick up the plastic and booties along the trail but their main responsibility is to make sure that the mushers and teams are okay.

Today they came into Rainy Pass with word of a musher who needed help on the trail between Finger Lake and Rainy Pass. The sweeps unloaded the sleds behind their snowmachines and prepared to take a vet back over the trail to help him. Plans were made to bring his dogs out on the sleds behind the snowmachines. Then the decision was made to send help from Finger Lake, instead of Rainy Pass. So we are all waiting to see if the Finger Lake crew could get his team and the musher back to Rainy Pass. If, for some reason, they can’t get him out, the sweeps will go back out from here.

The sweeps will follow the teams all the way to Nome through all kinds of weather and trail conditions. They carry their own gas and oil for the snowmachines. They carry all the gear that they might need for two weeks. My hat is off to the trail sweeps, the unsung heroes of the Iditarod!

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Champions and Red Lantern Winners

Posted March 11, 2001

Get the list of Champions and Red Lantern Winners from the Iditarod website.

I ask my students questions such as:

- Who is the musher who took the longest to get to Nome
- Which race were the winner and Red Lantern winner closest together?

- Which musher(s) broke his or her own race records?
- Which musher has set the race record the most times?
- Who holds the current race record?
- How much faster is that than the first Iditarod winner?
- What is the difference between the winning and Red Lantern times for the 1990 race?
- Which race were the winner and Red Lantern winner the farthest apart?

Have your students write their own questions based on the Iditarod champions and Red Lantern winners. Then they can trade with their classmates and have their partners answer their questions. You’ll find that the kids are great questioners.

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Hello, teachers and students,

I’m in Grayling for my second day. The mushers started coming in last night after dark. Jeff King arrived first with a good looking team. They sped down the street and almost blew by the checker. Then an hour or so later Doug Swingley came into town but just for a few minutes. He stopped to sign in, the vets checked his dogs, and off he went down the Yukon River. It was incredibly windy last night (by my standards) but it wasn’t very cold when the wind wasn’t blowing. The village children all turned out to watch the mushers come in and to ask for autographs. Each musher that came in got a warm reception from the crowd. I went to bed at midnight as I had little sleep in McGrath with all the fun and festivities there.

This morning I watched Martin Buser eat his dinner at what should have been breakfast time. He told me that he is no longer running for first. I saw Rick Swenson this morning but slept while Jerry Riley came in and left. Sonny King came in this morning also. I saw Paul Gebhardt leave this morning. John Baker shared muktuk (whale fat and skin) and seal meat with the volunteers and me. It was surprising good. I also saw Rick Mackey, DeeDee Jonrowe, John Baker, Mitch Seavey, and Ramey Smyth come in. Their dogs are all bedded down behind the community hall.

It is another gray day with light snowfall at times. It has been much warmer here than normal, one of the residents told me. I don’t know when I’ll be leaving or where I’ll be going.

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
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Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Hi, teachers, students, and race fans!

I just came from the checkpoint at Unalakleet where I was able to listen in on Rick Swenson’s conversation. Rick and Jerry Riley are both at the checkpoint resting. Rick said that the trail from Eagle Island to Kaltag was the roughest he has ever seen. The snowmachines keep turning the trail up so that it is like wet concrete. He also said that he ran with two wolves last night near Old Woman’s Cabin, 40 miles outside of Unalakleet. He said that they were about 50 yards off the trail and described seeing “laser like golden eyes” in the dark. Other mushers reported seeing caribou in the area and Rick thinks that was the same area the wolves were in. He told of losing three of his leaders, one at McGrath and two at Shageluk, due to injuries, illness, and just tired of running. He said that has hurt his chances this year.

The weather in Unalakleet turned bad for flying since I’ve been here. It snowed during the night and the visibility is very low. Yesterday when I arrived the streets were bare gravel or ice. Today the ice and gravel are covered with a few inches of fluffy snow. The winds aren’t as bad today as I have always heard.

Did you know that the Eskimos have 200 words for snow? After being here, I understand why. Just a few degrees colder in temperature and the snow makes a different crunching sound. The people at Grayling told me that it has an entirely different sound at 30 below zero.

Today I walked on the beach at Unalakleet. I saw the drying racks for the fish in the summer. I saw piles of driftwood, wood that drifts in on the ocean currents. Unalakleet is different from Grayling in that the people here drive pickup trucks and four wheelers. At Grayling everyone was driving a snowmachine or walking. I did not see a car or truck while I was there. In the summer they use four wheelers and boats at Grayling for their transportation.

It is so beautiful here in Alaska; the variety from place to place is phenomenal. Yet the people are not strangers to each other, even though there are great distances involved. The school sports’ teams fly from town to town to play their games. The student athletes must take cold weather survival gear with their sports gear. They must be prepared to stay days if they are stranded somewhere due to weather conditions.

Thanks for allowing me to share my experiences with you.

Diane Nye, 2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Unalakleet to White Mountain

Posted March 13, 2001

Yesterday afternoon I flew from Unalakleet to Elim and then to White Mountain. Elim was interesting because it is a small village built on cliffs overlooking the Norton Sound. We left a veterinarian at Elim and flew on to White Mountain. The airport at White Mountain is on top of a mountain and then the city is below it nestled into the side of the mountain. We had to take a snowmachine from the airport to the village to get our gear into the checkpoint.

The village sits on Fish Creek and is protected from the bad weather by the mountain. White Mountain, the mountain, sits on the edge of town, is snow covered and has no trees on top, hence its’ name. There are many nice people here; they welcomed us with open arms. I visited the school last night; there are 65 students and eight teachers. In the third through fifth grade classroom there are eight internet accessible computers.

The schools here are working on standards based education and they have state mandated tests like most states. The students have been having an Iditaread, like many other schools, and they have a huge spaghetti banquet with sparkling alcohol free champagne when everyone finishes. The teacher shared with me how she has one day when the students must declare their 24 hour layover and the students cannot read that day toward their goal of Nome.

There are no vehicles in this village; everyone has snowmachines and four wheelers but no cars or trucks.

We set up a large tent on the river so that the mushers can get out of the wind to check in. The guys chopped a large hole for water for the dogs. We put stakes out all around it so no one falls in the water hole. This is home of the mandatory eight hour rest break before the final sprint to Nome so we have prepared a small room so that the mushers can sleep for a few hours while they are here.

We are expecting Doug Swingley within a few hours.

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Questions About Joe Redington, Sr.

Posted March 13, 2001

To the class of fourth graders at Leesylvania Elementary School in Woodbridge, Virginia: I sent you a personal note but it came back to me.

You are the first class to ever ask this question about finding information about Joe Redington, Sr. I know that there is a book published about Joe’s life and a video also. You can order both of them through the Iditarod e-store or mail order catalog. Be careful with the video as there are a couple of places where the language and content is inappropriate for use with students. But you can preview it and skip over those parts. I haven’t read the book yet. You could ask write to the Knik Museum and Mushers’ Hall of Fame with your questions. There are two ladies who work there and are awesome.

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod TOTT

Editors Note: Knik Museum and Mushers Hall of Fame is only open in the summer except by special arrangement. The book on Joe, Sr.’s life is a bit too old for fourth graders. I would think of that book for high school or adult readers.

I will be placing an article about Joe Redington, Sr. in the General Information section of the iditarod.com site later this evening. Perhaps that will help answer some of your questions.
Dear Teachers and Students,

If you want to write to schools along the trail, please keep several things in mind.

1. Most schools are poor village schools. They can not afford the postage to send out replies. Please send a self addressed, stamped envelope.

2. The villages are remote and it takes a long time for mail to arrive and to be returned to you.

3. The classes are tiny; one school I visited didn’t even have any second graders this year. Some classes might only have two or three students. The students won’t be able to write personal replies to your students.

One teacher shared with me that one year her students each wrote 12 letters to other students in one class. That is too much to expect children to do.

In the month of February, one teacher received 100 letters asking for pen pals. You will probably get back a form letter from the village teacher. Please appreciate the time and energy that this teacher had to put into writing a reply to you.

Please be respectful of the cultural differences in the villages.
Prices in the Bush

Posted March 13, 2001   Dear Teachers and Students,

A visit to the local store revealed these prices:

- One pound of saltine crackers $4.39
- Carnation Hot Cocoa Mix (10 oz.) $3.65
- One dozen eggs $3.39
- Sara Lee Cheesecake (19 oz.) $7.15
- One can of Pepsi $0.95

Compare the village store prices to your local grocery store.

Brainstorm how you could get your groceries if you lived in a remote village and wanted to get your groceries cheaper. How many options can you devise?

A related thought:

The pizza place in Unalakleet, Peace on Earth, delivers a hot pizza up and down Norton Sound for an extra ten dollar fee. It comes wrapped just like the pizza you might get delivered to your house and the customer returns the insulated box the next time they order a pizza. The pizza is delivered by one of the airplanes that serves the villages.

OPTIONS available to the villagers:

1. Order food in bulk for five to six months from Anchorage. This requires a lot of planning to anticipate your needs.

2. Have food shipped in bulk from Anchorage and pay for the shipping.

3. Order from Nome’s grocery store and pay a ten dollar delivery fee to have it shipped (if you live in White Mountain). It will be delivered by airplane the next day.

4. Hunt for meat and collect berries.

5. Have your family in the states mail you food.

6. If you don’t have it, do without.

Happy Trails,

Diane Nye, 2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Swingley Arrives in White Mountain

Posted March 13, 2001

This afternoon, Doug Seingley arrived in White Mountain. In the hour before his arrival, the villagers started taking their snowmachines to the top of White Mountain to look over Golovin Bay to see if they could spot him.

As Doug approached town, the church bells rang out, the school children emerged and people seem to come from every direction. He rounded the point and headed toward the checkpoint as the snow flew. It was a glorious sight to see his beautiful dog team running in to the village. Everyone crowded around as he signed in with the checkers, bedded down his team, removed booties, and took care of his dogs.

Less than two hours later, he made his way to the City Hall building for some lunch. He said that the winds over Little Mount McKinley (as the mushers’ call a mountain outside of Elim) were brutal. Upon entering the building, he hung up his parka and outerwear to dry and asked to see the latest race updates so he could check on the competition. He then made his way back to the kitchen to eat. I am attaching photos so you could see Doug working with his dogs.

Enjoying my last day on the trail and looking forward to my arrival in Nome!

Happy Trails

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Musher Watching in Nome

Posted March 14, 2001

Hello, race fans,

I’m in Nome, arriving last night. I was up at 5:00 to see Doug Swingley come into Nome; he took his time and didn’t arrive until close to 7:00. His team looked good coming into the chute and he was grinning from ear to ear. Once he crossed the finish line, his friend, Melanie, was there to greet him. Then there were a lot of television interviews, the presentation of the new Chrysler truck, the gigantic $60,000 check from the National Bank of Alaska, and then the presentation of the lead dog awards to Peppy and Speedy. He was in the chute a long time and then he had a call from Tony Knowles, Governor of Alaska.

After what seemed a long time, he was able to wander off to visit with the press at the Iditarod Headquarters and then later to breakfast. He told the crowd that he was looking forward to the shower more than the check, but later he corrected that statement saying that the prize money is what allows him to run his kennel.

It was bitter cold this morning, between three degrees and ten degrees below zero. Everyone in the crowd was bundled in warm parkas, snowsuits, hats, gloves, warm boots, scarves of all kinds. It was a sight to see.

Later in the day we were all thrilled to assemble once again on Front Street to welcome Linwood Fiedler to Nome. This time the weather was warmer but it was snowing hard. He has never placed in the top five mushers in the last 13 Iditarods. He told the crowd about how this year he has spent a lot of time with his dogs, driving to training grounds since his hometown hasn’t had much snow. He felt that he knows them better than any dog team he has ever had.

He also related how he has never felt before that he could run with the leaders until this year when he devised his race strategy after training his dogs. Then he devised the plan of taking his 24 hour layover later than anyone ever has before. He felt that running in the lead all that time allowed him to learn that he could run up front. Linwood didn’t mention that when he won the prize money for the first to reach the Yukon river, he gave a lot of it away to the village schools along the way to buy books. These schools are poor schools by most standards and I know that his gesture is greatly appreciated by the schools — as well as race fans who admire him for this act of kindness.

I heard another neat story today of kindness. DeeDee Jonrowe learned that one of the other mushers didn’t have a harness for a dog (who most likely chewed through the harness); so even though she was competing with the other musher, she gave him the correct size harness that he needed. I applaud her kindness.

I have been thrilled to witness the mushers’ friendships up and down the trail. I always thought that there was fierce competition which there is but the mushers rely on each other when times
are tough. I hope that you will feel this way with your classmates and treat them with kindness and consideration.

Jeff King came into town awhile ago. I happened to be on the phone with my family when he arrived but I watched him from my window with his eight dogs running hard; my room is about six blocks from the finish line so they weren’t scared by the crowd like the dogs are closer to the finish line. I saw Jeff’s daughter and wife earlier in the day and I’m sure that they are relieved that he has arrived safely in Nome.

We continue to watch for the incoming mushers. What a thrill it is to know that that they have completed their goal and made it safely here! Keep reaching for your goals — remember to set them high so that you can be all you can be!

Happy Trails

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail

You probably can’t even spot Linwood or a dog in this picture. His family was in the chute and had a painted banner which said, “Congratulations Lindwood!” on it and there were many members of the media crowded around asking him questions. My pictures of Doug didn’t turn out; he came into Nome in the dark!

This is $2500 in gold nuggets that was presented to Doug for being the first to the coast. I was able to hold one of the nuggets at the National Bank of Alaska office.

* Images by Diane Nye
Hello, race fans,

What an exciting morning in Nome! Vern Halter drove his team into the finish line at 5:55 to a loud greeting from family and fans. “Way to go, Vern, from Oneida, South Dakota,” a sign read. Vern greeted his family and checked out each dog, petting and talking to each. He talked to the press about injuring his knee in the Farewell Burn but that it is healing; he said that his shoulder is still sore. He said that driver error on his part was prevalent in this race. He said that he underestimated his dogs in the middle of the race and he could have been in the top spots sixth though tenth; he didn’t think his dogs were strong enough to be in the top five spots. He said that he spent too much time getting out of Iditarod, that if he had gotten out sooner and pushed more that he would have placed higher. The radio announcer kept commenting on Vern’s smile at the finish line, calling it “The Million Dollar Smile.” I talked with Vern in Grayling and found that smile to be ever present. He spent several hours in Grayling and his team wasn’t moving as well as he would have hoped but he kept smiling every time he saw me. Vern talked about finishing 21st last year and that he was one day behind the leader. This year he placed eleventh and was two days behind the leader. Tough race!

Vern said that the trail was the most physical he has ever seen! He said that the message for kids is to keep going even when the circumstances are tough. You have to go on no matter what the lumps. He said, “Nothing is always easy!”

He felt that Doug Swingley did so well because he has a run/rest schedule that seems to fit his dogs well. He also commented on how well Linwood Fiedler did; Linwood lives just down the road from Vern’s kennel in Willow, Alaska. He said he was very proud of Linwood and, “it proves that anyone can do it with hard work!”
Just an hour and a half later, Ramy Brooks came running down Front Street, pedaling with his right foot the whole way. Wearing bib number 3, Ramy looked well and his dogs looked strong. Upon nearing the finish line, his dogs veered to the right and didn’t want to go down the center of the chute. Ramy’s wife, Cathy, called to them and they headed to the middle. Cheers from all in the crowd were heard. Ramy’s girls were there and there were hugs all around. The crowd was silent as this wonderful family held their reunion. Ramy ran down and hugged and thanked each dog next. Then he went over to talk to the press, a similar routine for each musher.

Stu Nelson, the head veterinarian, said his dogs looked good. He talked about how well Ramy monitored his dogs’ body weight, hydration, and nutrition. Stu commented how spry the dogs looked, joking that they look like they are ready to head to the next checkpoint.

Ramy commented, “It is good to be here! It was my goal to make it here. I made it!” He talked of running with a small group of Vern Halter, Hans Gatt, and Charlie Boulding. He talked about how hard it was to stay positive with the rough trail conditions and that most mushers had a different perspective on it. His final comment was that he had never been so happy to make it to Nome. He said that it seemed like the race would never end. It was his longest race ever, twelve days.

There are another eight mushers expected to arrive soon so I’m heading back downtown to watch all the proceedings.

Wish you were here to see the activities!

Happy Trails

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail

Information on Images:

Vets checking Ramey Smyth’s team.

Ramey Smyth feeds his dogs after arrival in Nome.

Ramey’s dogs are quick to eat so they can take a nap in the bed of straw. They are happy to be in Nome.

Sled dog likes his bed of straw at the Nome dog lot. Many dogs roll around until they have created a “nest” in the straw where they sleep and dream of the next time they will get to run the trail to Nome.
Dear Teachers & Students,

Diversity is one of the buzzwords of our society. What does it really mean and how does it impact us? Too often in our society we use words to talk about problems but we don’t do anything that helps. I’m hopeful that this isn’t one of those topics.

Yesterday I visited Sand Lake Elementary in Anchorage. Upon entering the school I saw a large, beautiful poster with a photo of the entire city of Anchorage and the Cook Inlet all across the bottom. Across the top, it reads, “The Pledge of Mutual Respect.” I read the statement across the top half of the poster. It read:

We the people of Anchorage, Alaska, pledge to respect one another, celebrating the differences that make us unique: our customs, spiritual beliefs, cultures, colors, dreams, and ancestral traditions. Standing together, hand in hand, young and old, we affirm that through mutual respect we can build a stronger more harmonious community, a more unified nation, and a better, safer world.

The Bridge Builders of Anchorage is the community organization who created the poster. I don’t know anything about the Bridge Builders but I applaud them for creating such a powerful, moving statement. I thank the school office staff who gave me the poster to share with you all.

Upon entering this amazing fifth grade classroom, I saw the diversity statement in action. These wonderful fifth graders were from Asian, African American, Native, and Anglo Saxon backgrounds, all working together, joking around, having fun … just like every other classroom in America! Their entire classroom was built around the Iditarod and they shared with me which mushers have had drawn out of a hat to research and follow, the sleds they were building, the booties they were making, and invited me back for musher gorp this afternoon. They were thrilled to know that my third graders also eat the same musher gorp; we both have Shelley Gill’s Curriculum Guide with that wonderful recipe in it. Thanks, kids! I enjoyed my time in your classroom and hope to make it back after the race to share my experiences with you first hand.

Diversity — a great goal. How can we help? Use the above statement and discuss its meaning with your students. What do they think? Does having a statement like this make people think about their actions? How can we build a better community and world? Does your community have a problem with excluding a certain group or groups? How can we as teachers address that within the school setting?

Happy Trails

Diane Nye, 2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Nome Banquet

Posted March 18, 2001

Finisher’s’ Banquet

Nome, Alaska

March 18, 2001

Tonight’s Finishers’ Banquet was quite the event. Held in the Rec Center of Nome, Alaska, all of the finishers attended. Karen Ramstead is still on the trail but Dave Tresino, who finished during the banquet, came in and spoke first. The doors opened before 4:00, we were allowed inside at 4:30 and serving started at 5:00. The food was fabulous. One of the highlights of the dinner was a huge sled on the buffet table loaded with fresh strawberries. That was worth the price of the ticket alone!

Many awards were given, prizes raffled, but the best part was when each musher got up and gave a small talk about their race. Just as at the Anchorage banquet, most thanked their sponsors but many thanks the other contestants, the trailbreakers, the vets, the volunteers, the villagers … it was an awesome storytelling time.

I can’t begin to share with you all the stories; you’d probably be bored to tears. Sometimes it is the aura of the event that you remember… that is it for me. The aura of being in the company of so many wonderful mushers, with their families and friends supporting them, the entire mushing community together … words can’t describe the event for me.

Some of the highlights of the evening were:

Awards Presented

Palmer Sagoonick, of Shaktoolik, was named the Most Inspirational Musher. Huge crowds greeted Palmer in Shaktoolik and Nome. Palmer had been a race checker for many years in Shaktoolik and decided to mush a dog team three years ago. He told the funniest story about his first time to mush when he took a very young team out and lost control immediately to be drug for what seemed like eternity to him. He had on two pairs of pants and both of them ended up at his ankles before a lady in a truck stopped to stop the dog team. He was quite embarrassed by the entire event; that was the start of his mushing career. Palmer shared that his dog team was hit by a snowmachine yesterday morning at White Mountain and that it really shook him and his team. He talked about the regrouping that they would have to do.
Linwood Fiedler won the PenAir Spirit of Alaska Award. He told about leaving McGrath without his usual 24-hour layover there, that he felt very badly about leaving the hospitality of McGrath and wished he could stay. But he heard someone from the crowd yell, “Go, Linwood! Go!”

The Dorothy G. Paige Halfway Award was given to Doug Swingley with gold nuggets for Doug, Linwood Fiedler and Jeff King.

The Regal Alaskan First to the Yukon Award went to Linwood Fiedler who told of seeing his first Iditarod movie years ago when they rang the church bell at Anvik for the first musher into the village. He always dreamed on hearing the church bell ring for him. He said it was a pristine night when all of the sudden “BONG!” piercing the night air. He said he arrived in Anvik, a “big, blubbering mess! To have it happen was beyond words.” After his seven course meal and a long sleep, he woke up with the idea to give $500 to each of the four village schools along the Yukon River. So he did. Since then, one of the race sponsors has matched that gift to each school. His final comment was, “Our kids are our future!”

The National Bank of Alaska Gold Coast Award went to Doug Swingley, who was the first musher to Unalakleet. The presentation in a shiny golden cup was of $2,500 in gold nuggets.

The Nome Kennel Club gives the award for the fastest time from Safety to Nome. In order to qualify for this award, the musher has to be in the top 20 finishers. This year there was a tie between Jessica Royer and Ramey Smyth with times of two hours, 49 minutes and 40 seconds. They split the $500 prize.

The Globalstar USA award for the Most Improved Musher went to Dan Govoni. Last year Dan finished 60th and this year 28th. It was noted that other mushers improved 10, 12, 16 and 17 places. How many places did Dan move up? Dan credited Panda Bear, a white dog with black patches around both eyes for the tremendous improvement. He said that she is a young dog who really stepped up this year.

The Rookie of the Year award went to Jessica Royer; at 24 she completed her first Iditarod in 17th place.

The Golden Stethoscope Award for the vet that the mushers wanted to recognize was the Australian veterinarian, Mike Gascogne (I hope that is the correct spelling; if not, I’m sorry, Mike. Mike and I were at White Mountain together and I know that he’ll forgive me.) The mushers said that they have a hard time singling out one vet since all of them do such a fantastic job.

The Golden Clipboard Award is a new award this year and it was given to Howard Lincoln who is the checker at White Mountain. The comment was “Small in size and grand in stature!” I was at White Mountain and I commend Howard for all the work he does at the White Mountain checkpoint.
The vets chose the Leonard Seppala Humanitarian Award to the musher who through various scoring techniques and observations was deemed to take the best care of the dog team. There were three previous winners of this award in the crowd, Jerry Austin, Rick Mackey and Martin Buser. This year’s award went to Sonny King. Sonny in his acceptance speech noted that he won the Golden Stethoscope Award in 1996; Dr. King is a veterinarian who started with the Iditarod as a volunteer race vet.

The mushers voted the Fred Meyers’ Sportsmanship Award to John Barron.

All of the Junior Iditarod mushers in attendance were recognized and winner Tyrell Seavey was presented with a trophy.

**Memorable Speeches**

Wayne Curtis said, “Drivers do it because they love the dogs.” He also said that this race will be remembered for many years due to the trail and that the finishers’ patch should read, “Survivor.”

Bruce Moroney and Peryll Kyzer both talked about Don Bowers and his book, Back of the Pack, as their inspiration to run this year. Don passed away in June of 2000 while anticipating this race.

Many of the mushers talked of the camaraderie of their traveling companions, that this race was slower than others so more time to enjoy each other, of having time to build a campfire along the way. It was fun to hear these stories.

The three Seaveys came to the stage together; they finished in 44th, 43rd, and 42nd. It was fun to hear them talk of the family affair. Mitch, who spent 48 hours at Grayling, waiting for his dad and son to catch up with him after he was down to nine dogs and two of them were not doing well on the Yukon River, said, “Things don’t do as you planned them, but that doesn’t mean they went wrong.”

Raymie and Ray Redington, Jr. finished in the chute four seconds apart. They came to the stage together also. They both thanked their wives for their help.

Aliy Zirkle told of her headlight burning out just miles from the finish line and losing the trail. A snowmachiner came upon her and told her she was off the trail. She had a penlight with her, trying to follow the markers in. She was the only one to go down Front Street without an escort because no one knew she was coming in. They couldn’t see her tiny penlight.

Gwen Holdmann talked about printing Don Bowers’ Trail Notes from the web site and then putting them into a booklet form. As she passed things on the trail, she would rip the pages out. She said that Don has described every bend in the river, every cliff, every island and that got her though the trail. She felt that Don’s spirit was with her on the trail and that he was her guardian angel following her out there.

Bill Cotter shared with the rookies a piece of advice, “My family, my friends, and God got me through this race. Stay close to God, family and friends.”
Ed Iten talked of the tough trail conditions, as many mushers did, but he relayed to the crowd when he realized it was bad was when Vern Halter said, “Man, this is tough!”

Many mushers thanked the groups of competitors that they raced with, each realizing how important the cooperation between mushers was. Jessica Royer thanked Tim Osmar, Ed Iten, and Jon Little.

Ramy Brooks talked about the camaraderie on the trail, the ability to laugh and joke, is what made this race bearable.

DeeDee Jonrowe talked of her scratch two years ago on the southern trail and how Martin Buser told her that he would bag up her demons for her when she was at Grayling. But she also told him at Kaltag to let the demons go because they weren’t good for him either. She congratulated the three awesome women rookies and said that the Junior Iditarod looked to be bringing more great women to the race.

Dr. Sonny King finished in ninth place and was recognized for his tremendous improvement. He said his strategy was “Move when they were rested, and rest when they were tired.” He talked about how his wife, Mallie, had said all along that she wouldn’t come to Alaska this year; then in White Mountain he heard that she was in Nome. So when he finished he kept looking and looking for her. He was thrilled when he saw her big, blue parka.

Rick Mackey thanked old and new friends. He drew a huge laugh when he shared that he and Rick Swenson had made a campfire on the Rohn River.

John Baker thanked his family, friends and sponsors. He especially thanked his son, Alex, who goes to school all day, leaves at 3:00 to feed the dogs, returns to school for basketball practice and then does his homework at 7:00. Alex still has straight A’s with a schedule like that.

Paul Gebhardt talked of traveling between Unalakleet and Shaktoolik with John Baker and Rick Mackey. He said that their teams were a lot faster than his. His headlamp burned out and he lost his way. He talked of coming over a hill to see one musher standing on the ice and the other laying there. When he caught up to them, John said, “We were going to stop and wait for you.” Paul relayed what great guys they were. He talked of the Iditarod as “a way of life, a way of traveling, what you feel with your dogs, and what you feel with your friends.”

Rick Swenson talked of being fierce competitors with Jerry Riley in the 70s, saying it was great to race together again, side by side.

Jeff King told about telling the checker at Kaltag about needing a double expresso so before he could leave the checkpoint she brought him two cups of coffee saying, “I brought two so you’d have a double and to make it expresso I brought it as quickly as I could!” There’s nowhere to get expresso in Kaltag.

Linwood Fiedler talked of his enthusiasm and excitement and of the people who always believed in him.
Champion Doug Swingley talked of being the Rookie of the Year in 1992, of Jessica Royer being 15 when he met her in Montana, of Dr. Sonny King training with him this year in Montana, of Linwood coming to Alaska from Montana. He said, “… a wonderful life we live … we all love dogs.” He thanked Joe Redington, Sr. for the paramount impact on all of our lives (the mushers). He talked about his phenomenal dog team, all coming from Elmer, his lead dog several years ago. He talked of Peppy, leading his team, and being the one to let out the big howls, saying, “Let’s get out of here!” He thanked Stormy, who is in the twilight of his mushing career.

The final presentation of the night was the Golden Harness Award, which went to Doug’s lead dog, Pepi! Pepi and Doug had many, many photos taken.

What an evening!

Happy Trails

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Nome, Alaska

When I left home, I had three personal goals:

- To visit most of the checkpoints
- To meet Susan Butcher and Libby Riddles
- To see the Northern Lights

Due to poor flying conditions, I did not get to a majority of the checkpoints. I did see Susan Butcher at the starting line, mushing a team for an Idita-rider. I met Libby Riddles twice and was able to have a long visit with her. Last night, my third goal came true. I saw the Northern Lights! What a thrill for me! I had been on the trail for ten days and never saw them. It was cloudy every night. Some volunteers saw them one night for about ten minutes. In the Anchorage Daily News there is an aurora forecast every morning. The last few days the forecast was “active;” yesterday’s was forecast to be much less.

Leaving Nome, it was about 10:00. It was snowing hard and I was anticipating a long nap before arriving in Anchorage. Instead, just after we passed the lights of Nome, I saw the twisting of two long strings of the Lights. They were a pale green color and beautiful. All the way to Anchorage we saw them outside the window, twisting, floating up and down; they were very mystical looking. Sometimes they would start to fade away and then they’d come back brighter. I wished I were a painter so I could replicate what I saw.

When we landed in Anchorage, there was one long, green band across the entire sky. It changed from a band to a pale green, almost white, moving, shimmering light display. From the ground, we could see them folding and twisting. Words cannot describe this experience! It was definitely one of the thrills of this once in a lifetime experience for me!

Happy Trails

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Good-bye, Nome. Thanks for the memories!

Nome, Alaska – what a place. My wish for all Iditarod fans is a chance to go to Nome some time. I talked to so many volunteers who spent their time in Anchorage, or McGrath, or Unalakleet and have never been to Nome. It was a treat to watch Palmer Sagoonick and Karen Ramstead as well as Doug Swingley, Linwood Fiedler, Jeff King, and the other front-runners come into town. The fire whistle rang, signaling another musher was entering town. The police escort went out and brought them down Front Street. I heard at the Red Lantern Banquet that every musher except one made it with an escort. Aliy Zirkle snuck into Nome when her headlamp wasn’t working and she was using her penlight to go from marker to marker. People come out of their homes, motels, stores, and restaurants to see the mushers come in.

Karen Ramstead came into Nome yesterday morning. Bagpipes played at the Aurora Inn. John Strachan of Anchorage brought his bagpipe and told me, “Anyone who comes this far should be greeted!” Someone else, I’m sorry I don’t know who, joined John as Karen came by. Two hundred people lined the chute to see her in! Everyone admires the Red Lantern winner as a testimonial to the perseverance to keep going! Karen brought in her fifteen Siberian huskies at a very slow, steady pace. She told me later about how they didn’t want to leave Safety and she thought she would take her time and get them to Nome… which she did! Her dog, Mannie, is a Canadian champion show dog, making Iditarod history as he was the first champion show dog to finish the trail. Her dropped dog, Oreo, could have made it, she told me. She dropped Oreo at McGrath at the start of the 24-hour layover and said that after the 24, Oreo was jumping around and in incredibly good shape. Karen said that Oreo could have come all the way to Nome also. Karen talked at the finish line of not coming back next year that she needs to recoup some of the expenses from this trip. Her final comment on the radio was, “It’s wonderful to be in Nome!” When her gear was checked and she was officially in the final checkpoint, the Widow’s Lamp was extinguished.

Snow removal began in the afternoon and by 2:00 the Burled Arch had been moved to its’ place until next year. It was amazing how quickly life got back to normal in Nome.

The students of the Nome schools finished their Spring Break. Most of the mushers and tourists went home Sunday night after the banquet. The shops were not as crowded Monday and I visited with Palmer, Karen, and Cindy Gallea. The mushers were very personable and told me stories from the trail. Nome on Monday was a much more relaxing environment.

Monday night was the Red Lantern Banquet. I have to say that it was great fun while I was there. My plane was to leave at 8:30 so I didn’t get to stay for the entire event. I had to leave when Karen was getting up to talk. Many of the other mushers were there and spoke, telling more stories from the trail or their training runs. Many of the stories were about the Idita-sport riders
or walkers. They took up the trail when the Iditarod mushers were running their teams. They slept in the middle of the trail, risking their own lives. How funny the stories were!

Dan Seavey, who placed third in the first Iditarod in 1973, told that the Red Lantern winner has less encouragement, less food to scavenge, less of everything but tougher trail. He also said, “The easy thing to do is to quit!” He said that the feeling is that it isn’t worth it, that Nome isn’t worth it. But that they wouldn’t give up in 1973 and Karen didn’t give up in 2001. He commended her for her efforts and determination, as did many of the other mushers.

I was sorry that I missed Karen’s trail tales! I’m sure that she’ll be back as she is one determined lady!

Thanks to all the Iditarod mushers, volunteers, pilots, vets, race officials, and race employees for the wonderful memories! It has been a wonderful ride!

Happy Trails

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail
Memories

March 23, 2001

How can I sum up the entire Iditarod Teacher on the Trail experience? It started three years ago and I have so many wonderful memories. But let me stick with the last month. I can’t begin to tell you how much learning I have done; I’ve taught with the race in my classroom for the last twelve years. Kids, there is always much more to learn!

The Junior Iditarod is a wonderful event that doesn’t receive much coverage. I loved watching the young mushers work with their dogs and race competitively. More importantly, I’ve watched these young competitors over the last month and seen the friendships that have developed. Seven of them went to Nome for the finish of the Iditarod and spent a lot of time hanging out with each other, as typical teenagers do! I am very encouraged for the future of mushing when I see these young athletes and their love of the sport.

Each checkpoint is a different experience and I thank all of the volunteers for enriching my understanding of the place I was in. Each is unique; each volunteer is unique and has his or her own reasons for volunteering. My best experiences were often the least planned. I was at the finish line in Nome, posing for photos with Jeff Schultz, the Iditarod’s official photographer. I looked down on the ground and saw an ermine scurrying across the chute; it looked confused by the snow fences and ran back up onto the chute and down again. It spent so much time there that I was able to point it out to Jeff who was amazed to see it on Front Street. An ermine is a weasel that is white in the winter with a black tip on its’ tail. Gorgeous animal, short experience, but very memorable.

Meeting Ann Bowers, Don Bowers’ sister, was another highlight of my trip. Don was my cyber-friend and he died last June in a plane crash. Ann was personable, just like Don. It was a delight to spend time with her and visit about the race. She was learning to love it, like Don did.

Seeing the Northern Lights was just an incredible experience. I’ve already written about it so I won’t say anymore.

The vets and their care of the dogs will always stay with me. Why would a practicing doctor give up two or three weeks of salary to come to the Iditarod? They love the dogs and want them to have the best care! My hats off to the vets!

I am in awe of how many Alaskan men are readers. I would think that the same would hold true for Alaskan women but I was stranded, due to poor weather conditions, with the men so I noticed them reading! When we were in several of the checkpoints, the Alaskan men pulled out novels
and read. The big burly trail sweeps probably wouldn’t want me to tell you that after the evening meal, they all settled in with books. I was so impressed!

Unalakleet was a place that I didn’t get to spend enough time. I walked on the shoreline and viewed the fish drying racks. That is a memory that will never leave me. I wished that I could have seen more check points; everyone assures me that I’ll be back.

In the late afternoon one day, Jeff Schultz came in with his computer and someone else had a projector. Jeff showed us his photos of the race up to that point. It was like looking at the 2002 Iditarod calendar as Jeff’s photos are the ones that will be used for the official calendar. It was a very spur of the moment event and the twenty or so gathered volunteers were very appreciative of Jeff’s willingness to share with us! You’ll want to buy those calendars for 2002! There were many awesome photographs! Like I said earlier, it was often the spur of the moment, unplanned events that stick out in my mind.

Getting to this point in the Teacher on the Trail process was not easy. I had the support of the entire community; thank you, Elizabeth, Colorado! The Parent-Teacher-Community Organization at Running Creek Elementary School organized my fundraisers and they were awesome! They know how to organize chili dinners. My art teacher, Nancy Mowers, has twice run student art contests and auctions; thanks to Mrs. Mowers and the students! The local artists have also held art auctions for me; thank you, Becky!

I also have to thank everyone who wrote to me, either before the race or while I was on the trail. I enjoyed getting letters of support when I could get a phone line. It was amazing to hear what some of you do in your classrooms and to know that our profession has so many creative people in it.

I also had the support of many wonderful friends and coworkers; you know who you are! Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

My family – my parents, children, brothers, aunts, uncle, cousins, and my dear husband – have all been so wonderful. I could not have made it to this point and along the trail without all your support! My husband has been holding down the home front (and delivered eight puppies while I was in McGrath) and I can never repay him for all he’s done to support my dreams. Thank you!

Thank you for the opportunity of a lifetime to the Iditarod Trail Committee and their Board of Directors. It has been the greatest experience!

Happy Trails

Diane Nye

2001 Iditarod Teacher on the Trail