

What a Long Strange Trip It's Been

This section is reserved for **you**, and we want to hear from all of you. It has been nearly 50 years since we received our diplomas, and each of us has much to share about our life experiences. Please send us your thoughts or a life story that has significance to you and might resonate with our classmates. Please submit your responses (any length) no later than **October 20, 2020** to: Charlotte Houchin Kresge at ckres@ptd.net

Our First Story: "From Juniata to Alaska and Back"

by Urtha Lenharr



I am Urtha Lenharr, once one of the voices of WJC Radio, student and chef for Juniata Food Service during my college days of 1967 thru 1971. Yep, I'm one of you, who walked the hallowed grounds of Juniata in the years gone by. Fifty of them now!

I walked out of campus with a degree in Education and three days later went right into teaching at a Correctional Institution in Sabillasville, Maryland. It was quite an experience, but little did I know that my adventure was just about to begin. Victor Cullen was the place, located at the top of Blue Ridge Summit on the Mason Dixon border between Pennsylvania and Maryland. The Governor of Maryland at that time was Spiro Agnew.

As most of you know, Richard Nixon asked Spiro to leave the governorship and become his running mate for the upcoming presidential elections. Before Agnew left, however, he wanted three of the five Correctional Facilities closed. "For geographic reason"...to move the educational facilities closer to the heart of where the problem originated: Baltimore, Maryland. So all of us, being State employees, were out of a job, because we were the farthest away from Baltimore. Having taught there for only a short 18 months, I looked for jobs anywhere west of the Mississippi River. I wanted to "see the country." Lo and behold, I landed a job in NOME, ALASKA. Back in 1972 no one knew where Nome was, including me. But in the cold of mid November of 1972, I stepped off Wien Airlines onto the snow-covered tarmac in Nome on the Bering Sea Coast. And my adventures started from there.

The first week was not only a climatic adjustment for me, but also a tremendous culture shock. My high school students were composed primarily of non-reading Eskimo children brought in from villages from all over the Seward Peninsula. Finding effective methods to teach reading to folks whose primary language was composed of one or two syllabic grunted sounds was a barrier not easy to accomplish. But over a three year period and with a State initiative program to support The Right To Read Program, I was a resource to make every teacher in all classes, Reading Instructors.

But I'm getting ahead of myself a little.

Two weeks into Nome life style, I found out that blizzards were almost an everyday occurrence in the far North. The high school was 3 miles out of town with nothing but barren tundra and remnants of mining tailing piles of gravel along that one road leading to school. On the day before Thanksgiving vacation, as we were all settled in our classrooms teaching, a major blizzard hit. As the day progressed, the road was impassible.

Word came through the intercom system that we would be stranded at the school with kids till the storm passed, and the radar showed it to be that way for four more days. Being stuck in school overnight with my students for one night would be bad enough, but they were anticipating at least four nights. By mid morning the next day, after a restless night sleeping on the floor in the classrooms monitoring all our students, the wind subsided. After a few hours of calmness, the State Department brought in a barrage of giant snow blowers and snow plows and was followed by school buses to take everyone to town before Thanksgiving Day. The storm returned after we were safe in our own homes back in town and, as it was predicted, it lasted three more days. Fortunately, we had Thanksgiving the next day with our fellow teachers and family without students. Quite a introduction to Arctic weather, but I kinda liked it!

Winter passed slowly that year, and as we were approaching March of 1973 and signs of Spring were approaching, a new epoch was introduced to Alaska: THE IDITAROD SLED DOG RACE. This idea of holding a sled dog race 1,049 miles from Anchorage to Nome was a feat that no one thought could be possible.

I volunteered in Nome (where the race finishes) for that first race, putting up markers and establishing housing arrangements for those finishing the race to rest upon arriving off the trail. The race was a success, and here it is 48 years later and still going strong.



Urtha volunteering at the finish line

A lot has happened between that 1972 race and now. I continue to volunteer each year. I was told I should run the race myself years on end by the gentleman who started this race: Joe Reddington Sr.. I would tell him: NO WAY. But in 1977, I made the comment that I would like to do that trail by snowmobile and photograph the race from the beginning to the end. The Executive Director of Iditarod at that time and a fellow Nomeite liked the idea and we established a five-person team to trek along with the mushers on the 1978 Iditarod and film it. We were not popular with the competitors of that year's race as no one had run snow machines over the trail with the mushers before, and they were adamant that it would hinder the snow trail for the dogs and affect the race in general. It didn't, and everything went off as planned, making us the first ones to ever drive snowmachines from Anchorage to Nome. Lynn Swann was Wide World of Sports announcer in Nome that year and, as we came to the finish line, he interviewed me and asked me if I would like to travel the Iditarod again by snowmachine. I had no hesitation in responding: NO WAY! (then adding) IF I EVER DO THIS TRAIL AGAIN, IT WILL BE BY DOG TEAM. ITS GOT TO BE EASIER THAN PULLING SNOWMACHINES UP MOUNTAINS AND OUT OF RIVERS.

Little did I know that joke would turn into a reality 13 years later, with pressure from Joe Reddington Sr. (remember him?) and famed explorer Norman D. Vaughan who talked me into taking a year off teaching and train with them for the 1991 Iditarod Sled Dog Race.



Urtha at the Starting Line

Although there are many things equally as exciting and adventurous in between all those years, I finished the race in 51st position that year. Since that time I have continued to volunteer with the race. I help out in Anchorage for the start, in Willow for the restart, and then I fly up to Nome, where I am the final checker that signs the mushers off the trail and logs in their official finishing time.

Two years ago, while waiting for mushers to finish the race, I was asked to use my expertise and familiarity with the trail out of Nome to go on a Search and Rescue along with two other guys by snowmachine to find and rescue two of the contenders who were in a white out blizzard and suffering from severe stages of

hypothermia. Risking our lives ourselves, we were able to get them out of that Blow Hole (80 mph winds and snow conditions) situation in time. We mushed their teams of dogs back to Nome safely and got the men out by helicopter.

I spent 20 years in that country teaching. I learned to use a lot of my liberal arts learning, along with the common sense that God blessed me with, to live that life to the fullest and to seek adventures wherever I go. Life is great.

“From Dog Sled to Space Shuttle” : Now that’s another adventure. How this same alumnae, teaching in Alaska, trained with the Teaching in Space Program and has been friends with or met 10 of the 12 men who walked on the moon.

Ask me about it sometime. I'll tell you another tale of my trails.



Editor's Note: Urtha taught in Northwest Alaska for 20 years. He also taught 20 years in Pennsylvania. He is now retired in Chambersburg, Pa.....but his ventures still continue!

Thanks, Urtha, for sharing your amazing story!

