

## MUSH FOR KIDS HISTORY



Alaska Children's Trust (ACT) was established in 1988 for the purpose of preventing child abuse and neglect throughout the state. ACT received its first legislative appropriation of \$6 million in 1996 with the help of Governor Tony Knowles, the Alaska Legislature and community

leaders across Alaska. In addition to ACT, community leaders formed an ancillary organization called Friends of Alaska Children's Trust (FACT). The mission of FACT was twofold: to increase awareness about the high rate of child abuse and neglect in Alaska and to raise funds to increase ACT's endowment. Governor Knowles dedicated all the money raised during his second inauguration to FACT and ACT. ACT's endowment now totals \$12 million as the result of FACT's continued help, back when it was still an organization.

Carol Brice was the first president of ACT and Deborah Bonito was president of FACT. Carol was familiar with dog mushers in the Fairbanks community, and that led to a conversation between Carol, ACT members and Mush With PRIDE (MWP). PRIDE stands for Providing Responsible Information about a Dog's Environment. MWP included Ken Severin, Chris Terzi, Diane Hermann, David Monson and Susan Butcher. Seeing a parallel between MWP's goal to encourage the responsible care of sled dogs and ACT's desire to promote the responsible care of children, the groups decided to co-host an event that would provide family fun while educating the Fairbanks community. The event would also celebrate the monetary support ACT was receiving from some big name donors. From this discussion, Mush for Kids was born.

Since everyone agreed on this concept, a committee was formed to make it happen. The original Mush committee members included Carol Brice, Rebecca Brice-Henderson, Mike Walsh (deputy

director of Governor Knowles Fairbanks' office), and Deborah Bonito, as well as interested community members Monte Lynn Jordan, Debbie Hall, Bernard Gatewood, David Leone and Taber Rehbaum. The first Mush for Kids was held April 5, 1997 on the grounds of Pike's Restaurant, thanks to Jay Ramras's generosity.

Many mushers attended the first year, including Susan Butcher. However, because a car had recently gone through the Chena River ice, no sled dog rides were planned. However, a parent asked Ken Severin if he would give his child a ride in the small sled (pulk) that



his Akita "Pingo" was modeling. Of course, Ken said yes. After a short pull through the muddy parking lot (which resulted in a happy though mud-spattered youngster), there was a line of kids waiting. Randy Brown offered to help with his big toboggan sled pulled by his genuine 40-mile trapline dogs. Soon Lynn Orbison was also giving rides in a four-wheeled cart. In following years, Dave Klumb of Laughing Husky Dog Sleds started giving rides around the parking lot to children too small for the "big sleds." Cathy Dimond also brought her huge Mackenzie River Huskies for children to pet.

One of the first "puppy-petting pens" included puppies from Susan Butcher and Dave Monson's kennels. Puppy-petting is still very popular at Mush, although today sometimes the "puppies" are actually adult dogs!

In the beginning, there was a "Tooth Brush Dog" wearing a dog pack full of toothbrushes and packages of floss donated by local dentists. The dog and a handler wandered through the crowd distributing toothbrushes to children. The "Tooth Brush Dog" continues to be an annual visitor and some years is joined by the "Toothbrush Pony."



In the early years, Big Brothers Big Sisters held a “Mushing Olympics,” with help from Lynn Orbison, for their “bigs and littles.” This eventually grew to include any kids who wanted to take part. A musher would team up with a kid who was competing with other musher/kid teams to scoop “poop” (tennis balls), undo

frozen snaps, walk with water (poured by the young teammate) in the musher’s shoe, and pull a sled with the child teammate on it.

More recently, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) athletes have helped with hockey puck and basketball shoots. They have also provided support loading and unloading children from the dog sled rides.

From the beginning there was a discussion about dog sled rides – but where could they take place? The possibility of breaking through the ice on the frozen Chena was too risky. Then someone suggested a dog “trail” be created. It was formed around the small woods next to Pike’s Restaurant. In 2001, before opening his newly built hotel to the public, Jay Ramras invited Mush to move the nonprofit booths and their kids activities inside. That year, Al Brice used a piece of equipment from Brice, Inc. to move snow to form a track around the building and cabins.

Even though the event was also a fundraiser, musher Bill Merchant insisted that there would be no charge for the dog sled rides as it was a way for the mushers to give something back. Over the years, many Fairbanks community mushers, along with more well-known Alaska mushers such as Jeff King, Vern Halter, Aaron Burmeister, Will Forsberg, Roxy Wright and Ramy Brooks, have continued to donate their time and dogs to ensure Mush for Kids is always a fun, free, family experience.



Eventually, Mush became so popular that all parking spaces at Pike's were filled. Cars began parking on both sides of the highway, almost to the airport, creating a dangerous situation. Plus, there was some concern about the number of people on the river. The difficult decision to change locations had to be made. On April 1, 2006, Mush for Kids moved to Pioneer Park, where it continues to welcome families on the first Saturday of April, marking the beginning of national Child Abuse Prevention Month.

The first year had been focused on fundraising for ACT. Debbie Hall, the Resource Center for Parents & Children (RCPC) representative, was responsible for organizing the kids' activities and convincing other nonprofits (particularly organizations benefiting from ACT grants) to participate and help advertise the event.

Mush With PRIDE was involved in planning during the first years, but was not eager to engage in the large amount of fundraising needed to host the annual event. Therefore, they accepted Carol's offer to shift their focus to providing the dog events while the Mush committee would take responsibility for the overall organizing and fundraising.

As the committee grew, along with attendance at Mush for Kids, it was clear the committee needed a coordinator to work with them. Lyn Gale was the first coordinator, followed by Coleen Turner and then, Susan Kramer. The Mush committee continues to have a positive working relationship with a local ACT board member, volunteer members from the mushing community, a UAF athletic department representative, a spokesperson from Fairbanks nonprofit organizations, and Pioneer Park personnel.



As Mush continues to be a yearly event, there has been more emphasis on the critical work performed by nonprofits that provide the fun activities at Mush, while the Mush coordinator, with support from the committee, concentrates on fundraising efforts and developing major donors. Major donors have included Flint Hills and Pogo Mine. Additional donations come from private individuals and businesses, plus “tips” left in donation baskets scattered throughout the event.



One concern that has remained consistent each year is, “Will there be enough snow?” Somehow every first Saturday in April, except for the 2016 event, there has been just enough snow for the dog sled track – although occasionally it has been called “Slush for Kids.”

This year, on April 2, 2016, Mush For Kids hosted the 19<sup>th</sup> annual event, featuring a plethora of fun activities for all children and adults who walked through the front gate at Pioneer Park. While it is still hard to get an exact count of people coming to Mush, the previous method of counting the number of hot dogs sold has been improved. Now there are volunteers using hand-held counters to click off everyone that enters. In recent years over 3,000 children, parents, grandparents and others have attended this fun, family-friendly event.