

# Chasing the Sun

In becoming a musher in her home state of Alaska, **Tekla Butcher-Monson '14** is carrying on her family legacy with joy.

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**D**aylight is precious in Alaska during the winter months. In mid-January, the sun might finally glance over the horizon at 10 a.m., only to sink back down again and disappear six hours later.

It is during these pastel-sky hours of limited daytime that Tekla Butcher-Monson '14 is at her busiest. Stationed between November and March in her birthplace of the remote Eureka, Alaska (population <5, though Maddox Angerhofer '18 was one of her neighbors in the winter of 2021), Tekla is up before the sun, watering her kennel of 35 sled-dogs-in-training alongside her friend and dog handler

Kiana Korta. After mixing a warm broth for the dogs that contains meat or kibble (water alone would freeze immediately at temperatures that typically hover in the negative teens), Tekla gets to work shoveling the solid waste of nearly three dozen canines. She consumes her own hearty breakfast, one high in saturated fat for preserving maximum body warmth, before she and Kiana get to work putting harnesses and booties on each member of the two 14-dog teams. Booties require gloveless fingers in the bitter cold, a daily process Tekla has perfected to about a minute and a half per dog. Then, it's time to hook the pups up to the sled.

PHOTO: Tekla Butcher-Monson '14 mushes an antique freight sled at sunset on the Chena River, near her Fairbanks, Alaska, home.

“Once the sun is up, we get ready to go on a training run,” says Tekla of the 40- to 50-mile daily excursions with the eager Alaskan Huskies. “My days are around maximizing the use of daylight since the sun only skims around the tree line for four to five hours. I am always chasing the sun. You are living out there with no running water, limited electricity, cutting your own firewood; you have to be able to maintain a homestead. Even people born and raised in Alaska will shy away from this lifestyle.”

It’s a hard life, for sure, but it’s a life Tekla loves and one into which she was born as the daughter of two renowned dog mushers. Her father, David Monson, was victorious in the 1,000-mile Yukon Quest in 1988. Her mother, Susan Butcher, remains the most celebrated Iditarod champion of all time, even 15 years after her August 2006 death. Before she was diagnosed with leukemia, Butcher was a four-time winner (1986-88, 1990) of the 1,000-mile Iditarod sled dog race that takes mushers and their teams through the trail system that meanders from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. (The route winds through the race’s namesake town of Iditarod.) She is remembered in the state on the first Saturday of March each year with Susan Butcher Day. David and Susan founded Trail Breaker Kennel in 1976. The Fairbanks-based business, which offers tours in the off-season, is now the world’s premier racing kennel. Tekla serves as general manager and lead tour guide for Trail Breaker, where her sister, Chisana, is

a dog handler when she’s not in Vermont studying circus acrobatics.

Tekla’s journey back to Alaska took her through Concord, where she entered St. Paul’s School as a Third Former in the fall of 2010. The family moved briefly to Seattle while Susan was undergoing cancer treatment. Boarding school was not a common choice for many Alaskans, but family friends recommended St. Paul’s and, after a visit, it was the only school to which Tekla applied. At SPS, she was heavily involved in the theatre program, a passion she carried with her to Wesleyan University, where she majored in drama and — inspired by the Chapel program at SPS — minored in religion.

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“I can’t help myself. I am obsessed with community,” Tekla says, “and St. Paul’s was my first experience with an intentionally tight-knit community. I remember when I came back after my first semester away a journal entry where I wrote about all these things I wanted to do, how many activities there were in the world. Alaska is pretty remote. If you don’t get out and live somewhere else, you don’t really know what is out there.”

Two winters in New York followed graduation from Wesleyan, away from the dogs and the call of the bush life in Alaska. There, Tekla focused on set and costume design after discovering that she enjoyed preparing the stage more than performing on it. Her efforts were supported by the family of an SPS friend, Eleanor Reich ’14, whose



Tekla harnesses her Alaskan Huskies before a training run.



Tekla heads out on a 40-mile training run with enthusiastic lead dogs Slim (white) and Jip (brown/tan).

parents offered space in their New York garage for Tekla to build sets. In the summers, she returned to Alaska to give tours for the family kennel business, sharing stories of her mother with captivated visitors. Eventually, the alley view from her Manhattan apartment and the claustrophobia of the NYC subway system led Tekla to make an inevitable decision.

“I loved New York City, but I finally understood what my mom meant about hating living in the city,” she says of moving back to Alaska full-time in 2019. “I realized what I was searching for was distance and space because I had grown up in interior Alaska. Even though I loved what I was doing, the things I wanted to do in Alaska seemed more pressing.”

There is a certain pressure that comes with carrying on a family legacy, but Tekla knows the only thing her mother would want for her would be to discover and pursue her passions. She is currently working on a biography that captures Susan Butcher’s own sense of adventure and the community she formed with her beloved Huskies.

“The fact that my mom was training hundreds of dogs and creating a bond with each to choose the best 16 to run in the Iditarod shows that she had a dedication and love of those animals,” Tekla explains. “The thesis of the biography is ‘do what you love, love what you do.’ This is personified in the sled dogs. Their instinct is that they want to be running, and that brings them so much joy. My mom was about finding what brings you joy and doing it. For me, that is the mushing lifestyle.”

While Tekla has her sights set on qualifying for the 2024 Iditarod, she is no novice when it comes to mushing. For her fifth birthday, her parents gave her a small dogsled. She recalls hooking up the oldest, slowest dog in the kennel to support hours of her standing on the runners and holding

on to the handlebars as she raced around a frozen pond on the family property.

“You can’t really teach mushing,” Tekla says. “You just have to do it. By the time I was a little older, I graduated to a two-dog team then a four-dog team. By 10, I was running eight dogs — two by two by two by two — which is pretty powerful. If you lose your team, they will just keep running.”

At the age of 11, Tekla had her first long-distance mushing experience. The family had recently returned to Alaska after Susan’s death. “We were grieving and a lot of folks around the state were, too,” Tekla recalls. “Mom had meant so much to Alaska, having won the Iditarod four times. Her training tactics focused on dog care and the relationship between dogs and humans. It changed the way the Iditarod is run; it was monumental.”

At that time, in early 2007, organizers set aside the No. 1 bib and asked if a member of Susan’s family would like to wear it for the ceremonial start, 11 miles through the streets of Anchorage. It was Tekla who donned the bib to honor her mother. In addition to that memorial run in Anchorage, Tekla’s father, David, wanted to show his daughter more of the landscape that had so captivated her mother. So, with each of them mushing an eight-dog team, 11-year-old Tekla and her father followed for 700 miles alongside the Iditarod course, with Tekla dressed in a red suit her mother had worn on the same route. The journey was not without its challenges. Tekla recalls that she often lagged behind her father by 20 minutes or more. At one point, she lost her team and — miraculously — the lead dog responded to her desperate call and returned the dogs so she could continue on. For nearly two weeks, David and Tekla stopped every 50 miles or so at checkpoints in small villages, where people knew

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Susan and were pleased to see her daughter embracing her heritage.

“I could feel the energy my mom had felt as she headed out on all her victories and as I met people she had gotten to know,” Tekla says. “In the middle of nowhere, we were scattering her ashes. We stayed a night with great friends, who told stories about her and her lead dogs. Looking back, it was quite the coming-of-age moment.”

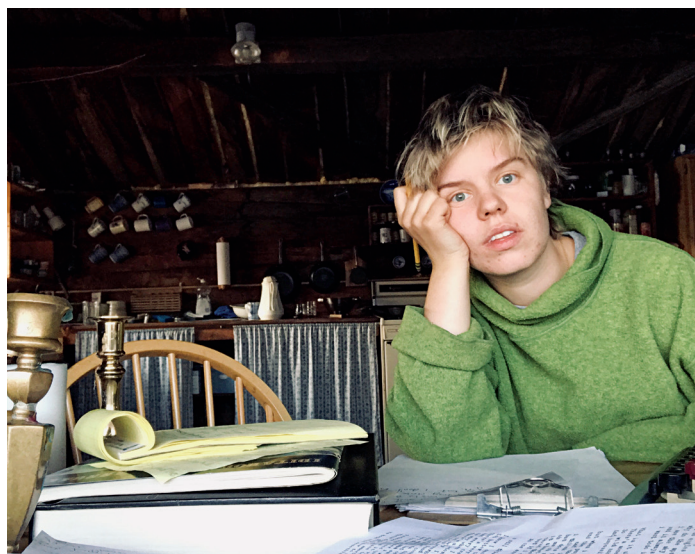
On the first night of that 2007 Iditarod journey, temperatures pushing 50 below zero bit at Tekla and her father as they camped in darkness. Tekla huddled in a sleeping bag with her mother’s parka pulled up around her face. The propane had turned to gel and a shivering Tekla remembers feeling like a failure until she realized her father was suffering just as much from the frigid conditions. They made it through the night and to shelter at a small village the next day.

In 2012, while Tekla was a student at St. Paul’s, she joined her father and Chisana, then 11, in once again mushing 700 miles along the Iditarod Trail to honor Susan’s legacy. Now, a decade later, Tekla is conditioning the dogs with an eye toward increasing their daily mileage in the winter. Last March, she competed in her first race, the 200-mile “Ididn’trod” Invitational, which begins and ends in Cantwell, Alaska. It took 30 hours to complete the circle, with snow so fierce that Tekla could not see the lead dogs 50 feet in front of her for the final 50 miles. She reports happily that she finished eighth.

“I think the most important thing about her drive to become a competitive musher,” David Monson says, “is not that we did it before her, but because it is her desire that gives her so much joy and satisfaction — just like it did her mother and me.”

In preparation for the 2024 Iditarod, Tekla is raising a team of Husky puppies to pull her sled as three-year-olds. With a team of veteran dogs, she plans to compete in the Copper Basin 300 in January 2022, the second of the three qualifiers she must complete ahead of the Iditarod. Instead of pressure, she feels joy — she has no expectation of winning the 1,000-mile race her mother once dominated, which is just fine with her. For the last year, Tekla has taken over the responsibility for training the dogs at Trail Breaker Kennel and running the tourism business that supports her mushing pursuits. She will become the full-time manager of the business when her father retires next year. Nothing makes her happier than living the bush existence into which she was born, despite its hardships.

TOP: Tekla as an infant with her mother, Susan Butcher. According to Susan, Tekla’s first words were “go, dogs, go.”  
MIDDLE: Tekla preps her dogs for a training run by putting booties on their paws.



Tekla works on her creative projects at her homestead in Eureka, Alaska.

“The sensation of working and living at 50 below curates a specific lifestyle,” Tekla says, “and that is what drew me back to Alaska and gave me the goal of running in the Iditarod.”

The wilderness life his daughter has chosen, David Monson emphasizes, is about self-confidence and self-reliance. “You have nothing out there but your desire and drive,” he says. “There are no people for hundreds of miles to help you if the going gets tough. You have to be confident in yourself to solve any problems you encounter.”

In the cabin in Eureka, once the daily chores are done, the dogs have been run and fed, and the puppies returned from their own 10-mile training run, Tekla settles in to work on her mother’s biography and a memoir of growing up in a mushing family (she also posts on the Instagram handles trailbreaker kennel and dogmushers-daughter). The memoir includes tips that range from how to sew your own harness to the rules of bush cribbage.

For the biography, she has been archiving coverage of her mother’s life as a musher and plans to begin conducting interviews with many who knew her. It strikes Tekla that she is the same age her mother was when she began her mushing career. She sees Susan in the inherited parkas she wears as she prepares for her own Iditarod run, in the handwriting that is strikingly similar to Susan’s, and in her own wide smile and blue eyes as she looks in the mirror.

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“What made my mom a good dog musher was the care she put into her dogs — she was the same as a parent,” Tekla says. “Every day, we are opening up our kennel to visitors, people she

inspired. It’s awesome to be able to be the embodiment of that legacy. If they see me mushing, they feel a reminiscence of the inspiration they felt from her. I get a lot of pressure to be a racer and win the Iditarod, but my parents never pushed me to be a dog musher or to race. All they encouraged me to do was what I love. I am doing that — and I am so happy.”



Tekla doing chores at Trail Breaker Kennel.