

How Dog Mushing Helps Village Youth

When you catch dog mushing fever, it affects your mind, body and spirit. The community of Huslia has embraced the Frank Atlla Youth & Sled Dog Care program. The program is named after George Atlla II's late son and is focused on teaching youth about caring for dogs, the science behind it, and how to race dogs. George Atlla is a well-known sprint dog mushing legend in Alaska.

George is 80 years old and he still runs dogs. Many dog mushers seek his advice and he occasionally lets others use his dogs. A couple of years ago, he loaned his dogs to a young musher in Fairbanks. George started thinking about his yard full of dogs and how to engage youth in Huslia. Having been involved with dogs for most of his life, he understands the benefits they provide to a person's mind and body. George wanted to share his knowledge with youth and this became the inspiration for youth to participate in the recent Junior North American Dog Sled Races in North Pole.

Kathy Turco is a RurAL CAP ~~is a~~ second year AmeriCorps Member and has been volunteering on the youth mushing? project. ~~When asked about the youth, Kathy said,~~ "They are not lazy and they really make George smile, that is, to know how willing they are to work and do a good job."

Commented [AG1]: This is a bit odd as I'm not sure of context that she was asked. Maybe state: Kathy says the youth "...are not lazy...."

~~According to Teresa Cox, Principal at Huslia's Jimmy Huntington School,~~ ~~t~~The youth are learning to feed dogs, learning about nutrition, and how to hook the dogs up to a harness. They are also learning to work as a team, ~~according to Teresa Cox, Principal at Huslia's Jimmy Huntington School.~~ Teresa says, "They come back so excited." They are learning how to race and handle dogs, how to become race marshals, race timers and checkpoint volunteers.

George and Kathy brought four youth to participate in the 2013 Junior North American Sled Dog Races in North Pole, Alaska. According to George, they've never had a junior musher from Huslia participate in the Junior North American Sled Dog Races. The youth from Huslia had to decide who to send to the races and elected four students to participate. Student Thomas Henry placed second in the three day race. He enjoyed listening to stories and hanging out with George. He said, "It keeps me out of the house and is pretty fun."

~~This March of this year,~~In March 2014 the program will send one junior musher to the 2014 Arctic Winter Games in Fairbanks and one junior musher again to the Junior North American Championship ~~in North Pole~~.

During all races, George coaches the students and gives them several tips advice. The youth know the names of each dog and have formed bonds with them. The high school students go to different dog yards twice a week. Some of the students go to the dog yards and help mushers every day after school on their own time.

Peggy Bruno, Jimmy Huntington School Teacher [shares](#):

How fortunate we are to be paired with George Attla, Kathy Turco, and their furry, four legged sprinters in this new program to reignite the love for racing in the youth of Huslia. Every Tuesday and Thursday, seventeen students don their winter gear and trudge to George Attla's, Floyd Vent's, Wes Henry's, or Wilson Sam's dog yard. Students have learned dog yard maintenance, nutrition, care, restraint, and racing equipment. More important, however, is how the students are becoming grounded in their cultural heritage and their community. They have assumed an important role in their life-long obligations as community members.

For more information please contact George Attla at 907-829-2248 or kath@alaskas-spirit.com

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Story by Angela Gonzalez and contributions from *The Resource Basket* Staff.