Leading the pack: Former Northampton woman tracks twin passions of math, mushing

By Bob Flaherty
Created 07/15/2009 - 09:00

NORTHAMPTON - One thing Caitlin (Brady) Santos missed in her Northampton upbringing was a dog. "I always thought I deserved one," she said, but her parents, John and Nancy Brady, didn't see things that way.

She has made up for that big-time. Way up there in Cantwell, Alaska, she and her husband, Mike, have been breeding and training sled dogs for the past six years - 58 dogs at last count. Their Wolf's Den Kennel's goal is to compete in the Iditarod, the 1,150-mile musher's marathon from Anchorage to Nome, called "the last great race on earth."

But meanwhile, Santos, 31, who has taught the past five years in the remote village's school, has been awarded a $150,000 fellowship from the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation of Moorestown, N.J.

Knowles awarded 14 math fellowships this year, in addition to 13 for physical science and eight for biology.

In her application essay, Santos described herself as "a teacher of everything from snowboarding to calculus." But the experience she considered most meaningful, "and which has influenced my ideas of leadership and teaching the most, has been my position as the leader of a kennel of 55 sled dogs."

The challenges of a classroom, she argued, are not that far removed.

"My dogs need to know what to expect from me, that our relationship and my expectations will not vary from day to day," she wrote. "They need to know that I will only put them in situations where they can succeed."

Earlier this year, Santos was flown with other finalists to Philadelphia for hour-long interviews by a team of experts.

"Caitlin has a very strong background in mathematics and an interesting life," said Nicole Gillespie, senior program officer at the foundation. "When we asked specific content questions, her answers were very impressive."

The money, dispensed over five years, will pay for tuition and traveling. Knowles, for instance, will pay for Santos' online certification classes at St. Joseph's University. She will get a monthly stipend to enable her to further her education, as well as money for classroom supplies and
"The most exciting part is professional development - during the summer and academic year," said Santos. Fellows meet three times a year at various locations, all expenses paid.

And talk about isolation. The K-12 Cantwell School where Santos teaches secondary math and science has only three teachers. She is the only one in the district with a degree in math.

She talks of the exquisite joy of solving math problems, what she calls a "thrilling treasure hunt."

"Math needs to be shown that it's bigger than just rote problems," she said. "You can solve, look for patterns, get to an answer."

Santos believes that more students would appreciate math's value and beauty if they were taught by people with passion for the subject. "Math is a really volatile subject for people," she said. "Some have a strong dislike for math. But in many cases it's taught by people who don't enjoy it, who may not even fully understand it. It's rarely connected to other subjects. But it's a thinking, logical process that people use throughout their lives."

Sold on math

Santos, who graduated from Northampton High in 1996, got fired up about math and saw it brought to life by then NHS biology teacher Richard Hurlbut and physics teacher John McLean, then graduated summa cum laude from Smith College in 2003. Dogs notwithstanding, the one thread that runs in the family is teaching. Her father, John Brady, is a geology professor at Smith; her mother, Nancy, is the librarian for the Smith College Campus School. Her grandfather, James Rinier, teaches at Kent State.

The great outdoors has always been part of Santos' life, whether it be family backpacking trips or summers with the National Outdoor Leadership School. She has tackled more than half the hikes in a book her father co-authored, "50 Hikes in Massachusetts," and she embraced all the outdoor programs offered at Greenfield Community College.

But her first exposure to the world of sled dogs, a summer spent working at a sled dog kennel in New Hampshire, became "an incurable addiction." She met kindred spirit Mike Santos of Ludlow - who has wanted to be a polar explorer since childhood - after her junior year of college. She helped Mike train dogs in Quebec in 2003. The couple married in 2006.

"I miss my family, and Northampton, of course. But when I do visit, it feels a little crowded," she said with a laugh.

The couple live in the original homestead of a park ranger, a place that was uninhabited for 40 years. They have no running water, no television programs - and the grocery store is 150 miles away in Fairbanks. "But we do have Netflix," she said. "And the Internet."

Both work for a sled dog touring company to help pay bills.

But the Iditarod remains the main prize, and fielding the perfect 16-member team to compete in it is the focus. Wolf's Den's top team finished first, with the fastest overall time in three years, in January's Bowers 300, a 300-mile qualifier for both the Iditarod and Yukon Quest.

"Mike is an incredible sled dog trainer, the closest thing to marrying a dog," Santos said.

At six months, a dog is ready for the harness. The couple developed a new, free-moving harness that attaches by the rib cage and allows dogs to move as naturally as they do without a harness. "It allows freer movement," said Santos. "There's a misconception about pulling heavy weight; a lot of the time it's just keeping the sled moving."

Santos described the moment of choosing a team. "When you're hooking them up, all are barking and raising paws, 'Pick me! Pick me!' Then, once you pull out the snow hook (anchor),
absolute silence. All you hear are the dogs panting and the sled gliding through snow. Barking to instant silence. Every time. It gives you chills."

Her five-year plan? "To be a math leader in the district, to develop long-lasting relationships in my cohort (union of fellows), even when the fellowship runs out - and to have running water."

Bob Flaherty can be reached at bflaherty@gazettenet.com.

Daily Hampshire Gazette © 2008 All rights reserved

Source URL: http://www.gazettenet.com/2009/07/15/leading-pack

Caitlin Santos embraces her dog "Ninety" in Alaska. Ninety is Santos' first dog, now among the dozens that she and her husband have trained as sled dogs.

Wolf's Den Kennel URL: http://wolfsdenkennel.com/