

# Teachers create a little Nordic nirvana in Unalakleet

By Laurie McNicholas

Unalakleet's winds are formidable—strong and frequent enough to form high snowdrifts in town despite an extensive fence intended to block the snow.

But youngsters in the Unalakleet Nordic Ski Program literally take the highest drifts in stride.

"Last winter we skied all the way to the AC store and onto the roof," recalls Nancy Persons, who teaches third grade at Unalakleet Schools and serves as cross-country skiing coach for elementary and high school students. "That's something to tell your kids," she said to her skiers.

Nancy and her husband, Christian, who teaches science at Frank A. Degan High School, have revitalized cross-country skiing in Unalakleet Schools in the past three years. They started with a half-dozen beginning skiers and now have 35 students, one of whom plans to compete in the biathlon at the Arctic Winter Games next March in Grande Prairie, Alberta. She is Sierra Corsetti, a high school junior who entered only cross-country ski races in the 2008 Arctic Winter Games. The biathlon combines cross-country skiing and target shooting with a rifle.

Both Persons are lifelong skiers. Nancy has competed in cross-country ski races as long as 50K. Christian has engaged in competitive downhill skiing on the renowned slopes at Whitefish, Mont., his hometown, and in telemark (backcountry) skiing. "My father was an engineer, so I lived all over the United States and attended 11 schools back east," Nancy said. "Christian and I met on a beach in Mexico."

The Persons moved to Unalakleet from Morocco in 2006. "Moving here made the most sense because it's like teaching overseas—an adventure," Nancy said. "It's a culture my husband and I new nothing about, and we had spent 11 years teaching overseas learning about other cultures."

"Unalakleet is a challenging place to have a ski program," Christian said.

"It could not be more difficult," Nancy agreed. She tries to emphasize to students her appreciation of their accomplishments under extreme conditions, but they take the wind and cold in stride. "It's funny, as soon as its warms up to around zero, they peel clothes off, leave them everywhere," Nancy said. "They say, 'There's sweat, it's cold, running down my back.'"

The Persons conduct five weekly cross-country ski practices starting in December. Upper elementary and middle school students' ski practice begins at 4 p.m. (just before dark) on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and at 2 p.m. on Saturdays. Students in lower elementary grades practice for one hour on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. When the wind chill temperature drops below -20 degrees, practice is cancelled.

Christian uses a snowmobile attached to a Tidd Tech groomer to pack snow into trails behind and in front of Unalakleet's snow fence. Skiers use the parallel grooves Christian cuts in the trails to learn and practice the classic (straight ahead) cross-country skiing technique. He said all the kids want to skate ski (pushing one ski and then the other out at an angle so the inner edge of the ski is driven against the snow, similar to ice skating), but they need to learn the classic technique first. He joins Nancy and the crop of young skiers after grooming trails.

"We stay in Unalakleet during the Christmas break and practice three times a week while the kids are out of school," Nancy said. "They come get us."

"We put a lot of energy into younger kids," Christian said. "They ask you all day long, 'Are we going skiing?' Under a full moon last December, we got parents to go out and build a big fire, and the kids skied to the fire wearing headlamps. The kids were given hot apple cider and hot chocolate."

"Iditarod mushers begin to show up in Unalakleet usually on a Sunday at the beginning of spring break," Nancy said. "This year we held a community ski race on Saturday [a



Photo by Melanie Sagoonick

**HAPPY SKI CLASS**—Cross-country skiers in the Unalakleet Nordic Ski Program pose with their coach, third grade teacher Nancy Persons. Pictured from left are Sikulik Johnson, Ada Harvey, Aly Daniels, Timmy Sagoonick, Korbin Storms, Jayden Wilson, Persons, Summer Sagoonick, Bobbie Storms in back and Ravenne Storms in front, Larry Wilson and Taylor Harvey.

day before Iditarod mushers were due], and the media was here with nothing to do, so we made the news." Channel 2 (KTUU in Anchorage) and National Public Radio covered the ski race.

### Competitive skiing events

Through the Western Interior Ski Association (WISA), Unalakleet's young skiers have an opportunity to compete with teams from other rural schools that are off Alaska's road system. WISA was created in 1986 by John Miles, who traveled to villages to fit children for boots, skis and poles and launched several ski and biathlon events, according to an article about WISA by Nome resident Keith Conger in the October 2009 edition of Cross-Country Skier, the Journal of Nordic Skiing (pp. 66-67).

In April of last year, Shaktoolik hosted the southern elementary schools district ski race, and Nenana hosted the 22nd annual Western Interior Ski/Biathlon Championships in Fairbanks. Forty-five elementary school students from Golovin, Koyuk, Unalakleet, St. Michael and the host village participated in the Shaktoolik meet, the Persons report.



Photo by Christian Persons

**LEADING THE WAY**—Cross-country skiing coach Nancy Persons leads elementary school skiers in a race in Unalakleet. Visible behind Persons are Kailyn Haugen (No. 668); Michael Haugen; Michael's mother, Lisa Haugen (No. 685); and Ravenne Storms.

They said Unalakleet skiers had a wonderful experience racing on world-class ski trails in Fairbanks in a 15-member team that included skiers from Golovin, Koyuk, St. Michael and White Mountain.

### Community support

Unalakleet's end of ski season picnic involves skiing, hill climbing, tree climbing and hot dogs, and draws family members of the Wolf-

Pack skiers to the celebration. Nancy said the community provides enthusiastic support for the ski program and turns out to watch local races.

"Just about every adult in the Bering Strait School District skied at one time, so most really do know how," Nancy said. "I'd like to see parents ski too. You can ski forever and get a lot of health benefits out of it."

Parents of skiers recently held a

raffle to raise money for the program. The skiers also raise funds. For example, they served meals at a Norton Sound Sled Dog Club banquet, and in turn the club made a donation to the program.

Early this month the program received a \$1,000 grant from the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation. The foundation awarded a total of \$12,000 to programs around the country that focus on young skiers.



Paul Mohamed, Anchorage, RurAL CAP Homeward Bound alumni and advocate meets with Ben Kanohokula Jr., a current RurAL CAP Homeward Bound case manager.

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