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Northland 300 hits the trails

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By: [LaReesa Sandretsky](#), Lake County News Chronicle

No one would have blamed the Northland 300 organizers if they had cancelled their event in 1996. The annual snowmobile ride was in its seventh year, but the conditions were treacherous—a whiteout blizzard hit the Northland. But the snowmobilers bundled up, jumped on their sleds and made the trip anyway.

“We never cancel it,” founder Kathy Karkula said.

The riders showed their determination in 1996, and earned the title of “the only thing moving” by KDLH TV during the record-breaking blizzard.

Karkula started the Northland 300 with a group of her friends 25 years ago. After participating in a number of sub-par charity snowmobile rides, they decided create a ride for snowmobilers, by snowmobilers.

“(The other rides were) always handled by someone who had never snowmobiled,” she said.

They approached Special Olympics Minnesota and asked if they would be interested in being the recipient of the snowmobilers’ good will. The organization agreed.

“We love the cause of Special Olympics,” Karkula said.

Special Olympics provides opportunities for kids and adults with developmental disabilities to participate in sports.

“By training them through sports, they find...this helps them in their everyday life of getting a job and existing in the every-day world,” Karkula said.

Northland 300 participants are required to raise at least \$700 to participate in the ride. As a group they always raise at least \$100,000, Karkula said. The Northland 300 has contributed over \$3 million to Special Olympics Minnesota to date.

The ride lasts three days. The participants start at Superior Shores in Two Harbors, snowmobile to Ely and spend a day on the trails there. Then, they ride their sleds back to Two Harbors. During the last four rides, Special Olympic athlete Steven Eull, 26, has participated, riding the 300 miles on the back of his coach Jason Reinsch’s snowmobile.

“He is one of our heroes,” Karkula said.

Steven, who has Down syndrome, said he loves participating in the ride every year, though his mother Patsy doesn’t see the appeal of freezing on the back of a sled for three days.

“I’m not a big chicken like my mom is. I’m a tough cookie,” Steven said.

Steven has been participating in Special Olympics for 20 years, and he said he’s met his best friends through the program. He participates in eight different sports throughout the year.

“I just like it and it’s a lot of fun,” he said.

When he’s not honing his athletic skills, Steven works at Target in St. Paul and acts as a Global Ambassador for Special Olympics, speaking to groups about the program. Steven has benefitted from the Special Olympics, but his mom said his participation in the Northland 300 has been a lesson for the other riders, too.

“It’s been fun to watch and see how Steven has become just one of the guys...they don’t view him as being different. I think these guys have really learned a lot,” Patsy said.

Steven will be carrying the torch at the opening ceremony of the Northland 300 on Jan. 23 at 8 a.m. at Superior Shores. Then, the ride begins, no matter what the weather forecast says.

Tags: northland 300, two harbors, outdoors, snowmobiling, sports, ely, fundraising

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