






# Running Down a Dream

By Maureen Sullivan

**JOURNEYS START IN DIFFERENT PLACES BUT THEY END THE SAME. A GLACIER RECEDES. A RIVER ERODES A MOUNTAIN. A LIFE ENDS. IT IS THE ENDING WE ALL TRAVEL TOWARD, THOUGH WHAT WE CONSIDER A LONG LIFE FOR A HUMAN IS A FLASH COMPARED TO THE MOTION OF A GLACIER OR THE CREATION OF THE BEDROCK ON WHICH WE LIVE OUR LIVES.**





“I’m a realist. I knew I had limited time with my dad, and I knew I had to make it count.”

It was spitting rain at 4:40 a.m. on July 20, 2013, when I turned right off Peger Road, in Fairbanks, onto the Mitchell Expressway, part of the George A. Parks Highway. I parked my truck at the site of Milepost 360, signifying the distance separating Fairbanks from Anchorage.

Kelly Carr, a 24-year-old biology major at UAF, knows the Parks Highway well, but that drizzly Saturday morning, she was minutes away from what would become a three-week journey where she’d come to know the road even better.

Kelly was going to run from Milepost 360 to Milepost 1 in Anchorage.

“I had to do something,” she explained. “I couldn’t just sit there and wait. That’s not me.”

Journeys start in different places, but they end the same. A glacier recedes. A river erodes a mountain. A life ends. It is the ending we all travel toward, though what we consider a long life for a human is a flash compared to the motion of a glacier or the creation of the bedrock on which we live our lives.

Kelly’s bedrock dissolved when her father, Stephen Carr, was diagnosed with intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma the previous fall. IC is an insidious liver cancer with no cure. The long-distance run would be a tribute to her father and a fundraiser for the American Cancer Society. Already the event had garnered more than 500 Facebook event invites, with friends and strangers alike providing encouragement.

## Constant change

The Parks Highway, built in 1971 and named in 1975 for one of Alaska’s territorial governors, boasts the most diverse topography and is the most traveled. It

parallels the Alaska Railroad and passes by rolling tundra, muskeg bogs, boreal forests, raging rivers, active glaciers and the snow-capped peaks of the nation’s tallest mountains.

After leaving Fairbanks, the highway climbs into the Tanana Hills, which span from the Minto Flats west of Fairbanks to the Alaska-Canada boundary line. By the time the road crosses the Tanana River bridge at Nenana, the hills have given way to windy lowlands dotted with small lakes formed in glacial till mantled with silt.

Pleistocene sediments make up the vegetated sand dunes along this stretch of road that follows the Nenana River to Cantwell. Large-scale coal mining efforts, with the ensuing scarring of the hills, are notable above Healy. Past Healy, the landscape changes again, giving way to jaw-dropping views, the churning river on the right, high rock walls on the left and a stunning eyeful of the range ahead. Depending on the time of year, small waterfalls tumble down onto the road, relocating bits of rock, slower than the miners do to the north, but the cycle of movement continues all the same. Nothing stays put forever.

Though a lifelong athlete, Kelly had no experience as an endurance runner. She had never run a marathon before; her longest run before beginning training for this was 15 miles.

Kelly had decided to do the fundraising run en route to Seattle, where the entire family spent Thanksgiving while Stephen had a section of his liver removed. After the surgery, the doctors reported that the cancer had

metastasized. Kelly immediately decided to drop her classes at UAF to spend what time was left with her father. Then she ran up and down the hotel’s stairwell for an hour.

## Hidden faults

The theory of plate tectonics postulates that mountains rise where crustal plates meet. One plate dives under the other, and the plate on top thrusts upward, forming a mountain. When plates pass each other laterally — side by side — the result is a major fault.

The Parks crosses a series of thrusts and folds and faults — two of the Alaska Range’s major fault lines are the Hines Creek and Denali faults. Tectonic events from long ago determined the rise of the Alaska Range, including Mount McKinley, or Denali, the iconic landmark of the Athabaskan landscape and Alaska’s most popular tourist attraction.

Describing the geology along the Parks, geology professor Rainer Newberry wrote in an email that of Alaska’s many faults, “some of them are clearly active. Many (the majority) have moved in the past and might move again.” The word “might” underscores the unpredictability many of us never really get used to. Movement of these faults change the shape of our landscape over time, but scientific models can’t make exact predictions. When and how shifts happen remain uncertain.

Intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma is a rare type of liver cancer in the U.S., but liver flukes, very common in Asia, can infect the bile duct and cause the cancer to form. Mary Jo Carr said that after her





husband died, she found letters from him in Vietnam to his mother, detailing an illness due to a liver fluke. The cancer-causing fluke could have been dormant in him since he was a young man. Gallstones also increase the risk of cholangiocarcinoma, and he had had more than 300 hundred stones out years before.

Whatever the cause, no one had seen this coming.

“Initially,” Kelly said, “the whole family was in denial about the diagnosis,” which gave her father mere months to live. “I’m a realist. I knew I had limited time with my dad, and I knew I had to make it count. I had to do something. We drove that road a million times, so it was significant for me, plus my dad loved to watch me run.”

“It gave me the best little guardian angel a girl could ask for on such an adventure — my dad.”

Kelly and her sister grew up in Fairbanks. Their parents moved from California to Fairbanks in 1974, not long after the highway was completed and before it even had a name. Stephen was a physician assistant, Mary Jo a legal secretary. Like so many Alaskans, the young couple hadn’t meant to stay, but they built a life in Fairbanks and raised their family there.

Throughout her youth, Kelly had played soccer for a competitive traveling



team, and her dad drove her to Anchorage for all her games.

The original plan for the run had been for Stephen and Mary Jo to follow Kelly in an RV, and for Kelly's older sister, Molly Wood, to accompany Kelly on bike.

"It didn't work that way. We didn't have much time."

Surrounded by his family, Stephen passed away in early April.

Kelly posted on her Facebook page: *"Sadly, my father lost his battle with cancer on April 5, 2013. This however didn't sway me or make me want to cancel the event. In fact, it drove the run deeper into my heart. It gave me the best little guardian angel a girl could ask for on such an adventure — my dad."*

## Eons later, the landscape plays both silent spectator and unwitting participant in our human endeavors.

### The sum of their parts

The road runs parallel to the Tanana River for a ways. Late Precambrian to early Paleozoic schist and quartzite make up the bedrock of this area, but "dividing the Parks into logical subdivisions," Newberry wrote, "is an interesting problem." There is no easy way to separate the highway into logical sections in terms of what lies under the surface. Since glaciers have covered half of Alaska at one point or another and the entire state has a rich tectonic record, the Parks runs through a patchwork quilt of materials, including Precambrian schists, Paleozoic sandstone and Mesozoic basalt. This quilt gives rise to astonishing beauty. On geological maps, one can finger the highway as it passes through different terranes,

fragments of Earth's crust that have traveled across vast distances, now bound together by faults.

Kelly has the kind of energy that makes people want to put on their running shoes and join her. Many did, more than a dozen, at different points along the three-week run.

It was not only Kelly's dogged determination that drew people to support the event; it was her unwavering enthusiasm. While people frequently thanked her on Facebook for doing it in honor of everyone affected by cancer, no one posted more words of encouragement and gratitude than the runner herself. She was constantly thanking everyone for the support, their donations, their

goodwill. Her own fundraising efforts were minimal — a few fliers and the Facebook page that an out-of-state friend created. The rest came with little effort. A running store donated shoes, the local Catholic high school held a fundraiser, and a combination of social media and word of mouth solicited the rest.

### Force and resistance

Gulches are V-shaped ravines; fast-moving water moves the sediment and carves into bedrock. The river can only forge when the ground is weak enough to receive it. An interplay between a river's force and the land's resistance determines the time it will take to turn a trickle into a formidable river. At Milepost 174, the bridge crosses a daunting 254 feet over a deep gorge known as Hurricane Gulch. The whitewaters of Hurricane Creek churn beneath before emptying into the Chulitna River.

At Milepost 104, the highway crosses the Susitna, or "Sand River" in Dena'ina. This river is one of the major drainage systems in the Denali region. Beginning at the Susitna Glacier in the Alaska Range, the muddy, silt-laden river continuously carries sediment to the Cook Inlet for more than 300 miles.

The Parks continues through a green tunnel of birch forest until reaching Willow at Milepost 70, the edge of a huge glacial outwash plain formed of sand and gravel deposited by a meltwater glacial stream. Rivers from glaciers in the Alaska Range flow into the Susitna from the west, carrying tons of sediment each day. During the last Ice Age, glacial drift was deposited from a retreating ice



lobe. Sediment-rich kettle ponds dot the area, formed by blocks of ice melting out from within the glacial deposits. What looks so permanent and tranquil at first glance is actually the result of thousands of years of movement.

## “All I keep on my mind is my dad and his milepost, number 1.”

Eons later, the landscape plays both silent spectator and unwitting participant in our human endeavors. Kelly averaged 18 miles a day for the remainder of the 21 days on the road. On a particularly hot day she became hyponatremic after 15 miles, drinking too much water while not taking in enough salts. Medics were called, took care of her and told her to give her a body a rest.

Kelly was driven to run not just to raise funds; she had also offered to run milepost dedications along the route. People requested mileposts for loved ones lost to or living with cancer, and she ran those miles with that person's name tagged to her shirt, sometimes a whole picture. “I don't want to let anyone down,” she said.

### Chance in time

The highway through Wasilla is flanked with box stores, but to the west of the busy town, a swarm of drumlins stands. Drumlins, long mounds formed by glacial deposits, looking like a bit like whale heads gently breaching the water, are ancient, postglacial landscape reminders

of Alaska's geological history aside new suburbia.

The last stretch of the road into Anchorage follows the Knik Arm. On March 27, 1964, an earthquake in Prince William Sound registering a 9.2 magnitude on the Richter scale caused massive landslides. The earthquake stole more than 100 Alaskans' lives and devastated much of Southcentral Alaska.

On the eve of Aug. 8, with just 20 miles left to run, Kelly posted on her Facebook page:

*“Ended at milepost 20. Today was definitely one of the hardest days thus far. The wind was a battle in itself. But we're almost there... Struggling pretty hard at this point, never felt this much pain and exhaustion. But it's definitely all worth it. Our family has grown so much from this. It's affected us permanently in such a positive way. And when I take a step back and see how many people's lives I've affected, it absolutely blows me away. All I keep on my mind is my dad and his milepost, number 1. One of the only things keeping me going at this point, since this is wayyy beyond something physical. It's pretty much all mental now. Not to mention an extremely emotional healing process. Wish us luck on our last day.”*

In a sense, it is luck and chance that get all of us from our respective Point As to Point Bs. It is chance that a rock is moved hundreds of miles by a glacier and then carried hundreds more down a river. Chance that one tectonic plate gets the upper hand and becomes a mountain. Chance that one cell duplicates and keeps on duplicating erroneously, until it forms a cancerous mass.

Kelly started a fundraising page on the American Cancer Society's website, <http://bit.ly/CarrDream>, initially hoping



Photo courtesy of Kelly Carr.

**An emotional end to the run: Kelly with her mother and sister in Anchorage, 360 miles from home.**

to raise \$10,000. When this magazine went to print, the amount was more than \$18,500. A popular donation amount is \$360, one dollar for every mile of one family's journey through a constantly changing world.

*Kelly ran down her dream. She's back at UAF and plans to graduate with a degree in biology this spring. Her sister, Molly, is working on her education degree, also at UAF.*

Maureen Sullivan, '98, is a writer, health coach and adjunct faculty at UAF/CTC teaching literature, writing and art online. She splits her time between Barrow and Homer, beach combing Alaska's coasts, making art with her finds and training for her next marathon, though she has no plans to run any farther than that.