KUAC reporters endure tough conditions to share Yukon Quest coverage

By Nancy Tarnai

When sled dogs and mushers hit the demanding 1,000-mile Yukon Quest trail each February, KUAC FM is along for the ride.

In one of the most unique assignments in public broadcasting, KUAC sends a reporter to cover the activities, excitement and drama of the Quest, keeping listeners informed throughout the journey. “Dog mushing is the quintessential sport of Alaska,” said KUAC’s Dan Bross, senior news reporter and two-time trail journalist.

“It’s a big part of the Fairbanks community, which is a mecca for dog mushing,” he said. Bross, who is the local host for Yukon Quest reporting, was the Quest reporter for KUAC in 2008 and 2009. On his first race, Bross’ fingers froze as he endured 50-below temperatures and high winds.

What engages listeners is the connection between humans and canines, Bross said. “When you mix humans and dogs, extreme environments and weather it creates a story that is really compelling.”

This year KUAC FM listeners are hearing Zoë Rom report on the Yukon Quest. A graduate student at the University of Colorado Boulder, Rom has extensive outdoor reporting experience. “The Yukon Quest is totally up my alley,” Rom said. “I’m excited to learn about another winter sport and becoming a part of this race that is so embedded in the community.”

KUAC’s race coverage is more than who’s in first or last place; it’s about people’s experiences and interactions. Getting those stories is challenging. “You have to be careful with equipment in the extreme cold and protect batteries and cords,” Bross said. “It requires a lot of attention and putting up with cold fingers.”

Bross said that covering the Quest was the toughest work he’s ever done. “The duration and conditions are extremely challenging,” he said. “Even the mushers get down time. It’s stressful to stay awake and meet deadlines for two weeks of coverage. I’d watch the mushers take off and I’d be envious because I had two hours of tape to get through and needed to write my story by 4 a.m.

“But it was a great experience. I got to do really fun stories and witness things you would only see on the trail.”

Another veteran KUAC Yukon Quest reporter, Libby Casey, knows that all too well. Casey, now a reporter for the Washington Post, covered the Quest for KUAC from 2001-2007. She had long admired KUAC’s Quest coverage, even before going to work for the FM station. While working on a farm in the 1990s she listened to KUAC to have a link to the world. Listening to Quest coverage made her want to learn more about it and be a part of it.

Once given the opportunity to be KUAC’s Yukon Quest reporter, Casey said she did a lot of research and preparation. “I wanted to make everybody proud.” Determined to paint pictures in the listeners’ minds, Casey delved into what the mushers were feeling, not just what they were doing. “This is a unique northern experience and I took it as a joyful challenge,” she said.

Getting responses from tired mushers was often difficult, but Casey determinedly got her stories. “I had to learn how to discern what was a good time to talk to the mushers,” she said. “I had to be strategic on where to be when and not miss pivotal moments, yet I wanted to bring some Zen to it.”

Physical challenges are plentiful, with reporters sleeping on floors and having few places to shower. “Roughing it was part of the adventure,” Casey recalled. As a vegetarian, she found meals particularly trying. “Once at a roadhouse, I ordered a cheeseburger with no burger,” she said.

Casey learned skills as a Yukon Quest reporter that she still employs. “Everything I needed to learn as a journalist I learned on the Yukon Quest trail,” she said. “I learned to be passionate about my work and to stay objective and keep it fresh.”

Rom is also devoted to telling good stories, especially about people who are chasing their obsessions. “I hope to capture that and put the KUAC listeners in the field with me,” she said. “I want them to feel like part of the race.”

Since Rom spent time in northern Norway last year writing about the history of sea ice exploration for Discover magazine, she knows that the Yukon Quest requires serious preparation. Not only did Rom stock up on long underwear, she diligently researched the race. “I’m amazed at the effort it takes to maintain dog teams,” she said.

“I love dogs, being outside, holding a microphone and meeting people. This feels like a dream job.”

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Cutlines:

*UAF photo by JR Ancheta*
Zoë Rom is covering the 2018 Yukon Quest for KUAC FM, continuing the public radio station's long tradition of following the 1,000-mile sled dog race.

*UAF photo by JR Ancheta*
KUAC reporter Zoë Rom visits with a sled dog at the start of the 2018 Yukon Quest.