

Going to the Dogs... and Loving It

How MICDS Prepared an Alumna For Success in the Snow

By Suzy Snowden Brauer '95

"Well, it's definitely not what I pictured I would be doing when I was at MICDS or even in college. But I love it and wouldn't trade it for anything!" Those are the words of **Sara Ross Hoffman '95** describing the dogsledding business that she and her husband, Kris, run in Steamboat, Colorado.

The Hoffmans own Grizzle-T Dog & Sled Works, a dogsledding tour business started by Kris before he met Sara. "I like to say I got suckered in because who's going to say no to playing with dogs every day," she laughed. The business is centered around teaching guests how to drive a dogsled, or how to "do the mushing yourself."

A typical morning for Hoffman begins with the hum of Kris' snowcat grooming the trail as the sun crests over the hill behind the kennel. With the sunrise, the dogs begin to wake and introduce their first morning song. "One dog starts howling and then they all join in and you have an amazing harmony of dogs singing together and howling all with

their noses up in the air," Hoffman said. The guides show up as the dogs howl their chorus.

Then the guests begin to arrive between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m., bundled up with excitement and expectation. Kris opens the experience with a 10- or 15-minute instructional speech teaching the guests how to drive the dogsled, including how to lean, how to control their speed, and how to space. Guests mush in pairs, where one acts as the driver and the other, the passenger. Drivers must weigh at least 80 pounds so they are capable of stopping the sled. Hoffman has had drivers from age eight to 80-plus. The passenger bundles up inside the sled and the driver or "musher" (also bundled warmly) stands on the runners on the back of the sled and holds onto a wooden handle on top.

Hoffman takes great care to make sure all the guests have the proper winter gear and are ready to be warm and comfortable on the tour. She says it is always surprising how many people show up in tennis shoes or high wedge boots that are not warm. She and Kris



Grizzle-T Dog & Sled Works allows guests to enjoy learning how to mush.



keep an arsenal of boots in various sizes and lots of extra gear and clothing for the guests to borrow to ensure that guests have a pleasant experience. "You have a lot more fun when you're warm and happy," she said.

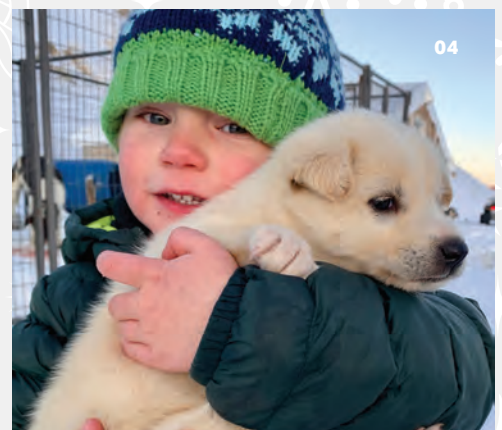
All guests drive on a private, 12.5-mile trail just outside of Steamboat. Halfway around the trail, the driver and passenger stop and switch positions, provided the passenger weighs at least 80 pounds. Children under 80 pounds can stand on the back and help an adult mush the sled; they just don't weigh enough to drive and stop it by themselves. There are six to eight dogs per team, depending on the weight in the sled, which also determines which dogs are used. Guests usually break into two groups of four sleds. One guide rides in front on a snowmobile and another guide rides behind on a snowmobile, "but we try to stay pretty hands-off because it's a quiet, peaceful experience and we want people to enjoy that," Hoffman explained.

After the tour, everyone returns to the kennel and enjoys hot cocoa, homemade cookies and brownies, and, for the adults, hot toddies as a special dessert. The Hoffmans tell guests to plan half a day for the whole adventure—including plenty of snuggle time with the dogs at the end. Hoffman describes the mountains as magical and says there's something about their valley that draws people in and makes everyone want to come back. One legend claims that the Ute Indians put a spell on the valley that entices people to return.

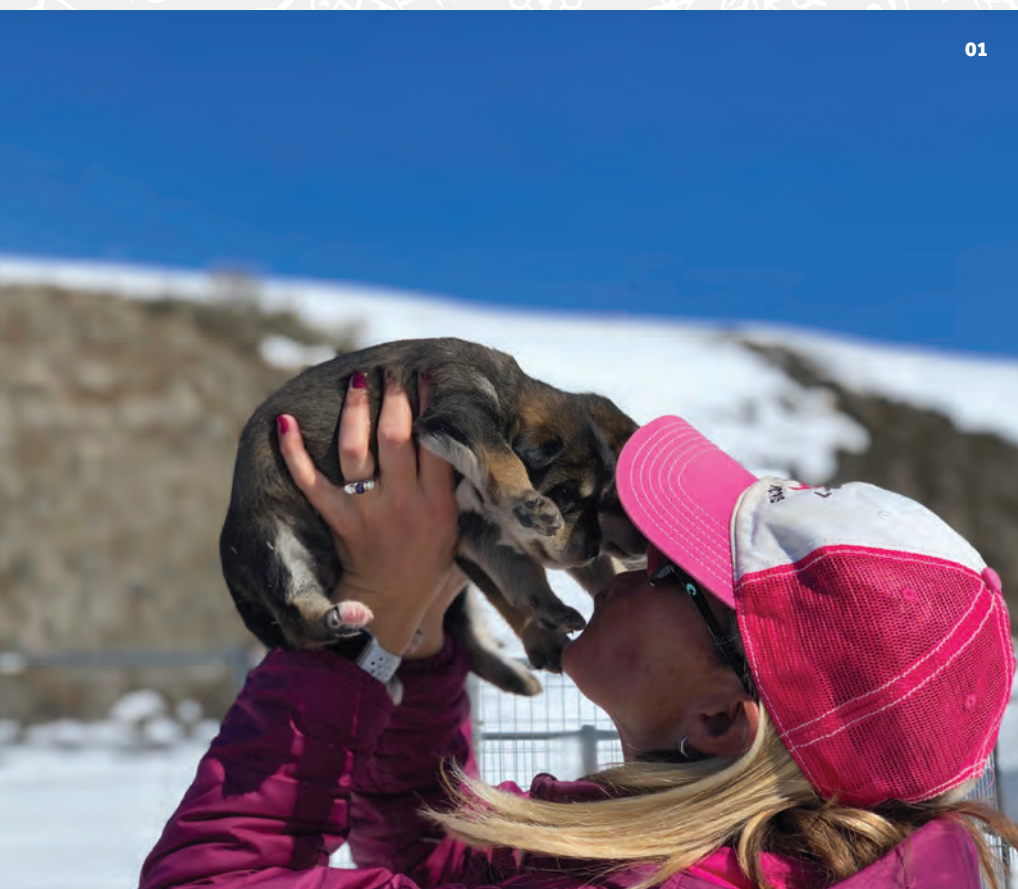
The Hoffmans own 107 Alaskan Huskies, and, not surprisingly, the dogs are really the heart and soul of the operation. Everyone in the family knows each dog's name, and the Hoffmans' daughter Hadley, 6, and son Hunter, 4, helped select the perfect names for many of them. The family has a fun tradition of using themes to name the dogs

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01. Sara Ross Hoffman '95 with husband Kris, daughter Hadley, and son Hunter.
02. The Hoffman family enjoys time in the snow.
03. Hadley Hoffman has been helping care for the huskies since she was born.
04. Hunter Hoffman snuggles with a puppy.



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01. The Hoffman family names litters of puppies after themes such as Star Wars, the Flintstones, and Harry Potter.

02. When not working, Hoffman enjoys spending time with her family outside.

so they can remember who is related. Each litter has its own theme, such as Star Wars, The Flintstones, and Harry Potter.

Hadley has wanted to help in the kennel and clean up after the dogs since she was 18 months old. She was a December baby, so Hoffman would bundle her up and tuck her into a baby carrier while taking care of the dogs. Hadley developed a wonderful and deep love for the dogs nearly from birth. Hunter is just as involved as his sister. The kids come out with their parents in the mornings to help them with chores such as feeding, brushing, and cleaning up. Hoffman thinks Hadley has a little more passion for the dogs, while Hunter prefers to go fast on the snowmobiles. The two children share a fun, mini dogsled that is pulled by two dogs.

Hoffman appreciates getting “unconditional love from 107 dogs every day.” She also enjoys watching her children explore and do things she never imagined doing when she was a child. For example, her children have been riding snowmobiles on their own since they were three.

Guests are often surprised to learn how much the dogs love what they’re doing. Alaskan Huskies have a passion and vigor for what they do that makes them want to run and run every day without ever taking a break. “The best way to explain it,” said Hoffman, “is kind of like a Lab’s obsession with fetch. The minute these dogs see their harnesses, all they want to do is run.” Visitors are also surprised by how loving the dogs are. Each dog has its own personality and most love to sit in people’s laps and lick their faces.

Their bonds are so tight with the Hoffmans that the children are able to hold a puppy just hours after it is born without the mother getting upset.

Hoffman reminisced about a special dog they had named Hattie. In 2011, Hattie was one of Kris’ lead dogs in the Iditarod, which is approximately 1,100 miles and is described as the last great race across the Alaskan tundra. Three separate litters of Hattie’s offspring were on the team as well. Hattie was a wonderful leader, and she trained so many of their other dogs. Shortly after the Iditarod, they discovered that Hattie had cancer on her chest. She ended up taking a season off and became their house dog. Hattie had such amazing drive and spirit that she wouldn’t let anything bring her down. One morning, instead of running from the house to her kennel like usual, she

ran straight to where they hook up the dogs and just sat there, waiting to get harnessed. Hattie was letting them know she was ready to run again. She enjoyed another four great seasons as a sled dog before she officially retired.

In her spare time, Hoffman loves doing things outdoors, such as taking the kids down to the river and fishing, hiking, or bike riding. She would love to have the opportunity to camp more, but it is challenging to find someone to watch the dogs. When they go on vacation, they go to the beach because they "need a break from the snow."

Hoffman has the happiest memories of her time at MICDS. She loves the School and said, "I think it always just felt like a family to me." She is fascinated by the history of our School and how many families attended and still go back. Hoffman loved the diversity of classes and particularly enjoyed neurophysiology, anatomy, and physiology. She also appreciated the many art classes she was able to take and has an especially fond memory of her French teacher, **Madame Kathy Standley**. When Hoffman was in fourth grade, her father was transferred to Brussels and the whole family moved there for two years. She attended the International School of Brussels, where French was taught differently than in the United States. When she returned to MICDS, she knew how to have a conversation in French but not necessarily how to write it all down. Madame Standley was kind and understanding, allowing Hoffman to take her tests orally into a tape recorder in addition to writing the answers down. Her teacher then compared the two while grading.

At MICDS, Hoffman learned a lot that she still uses to this day, but time management is perhaps the most important. Because the School allows students to manage their own

schedules, she developed the ability to multitask and prioritize. The ability to juggle multiple things at the same time, such as schoolwork and extracurricular activities, "prepared me for having three jobs, plus two kids, while dealing with a pandemic," she said. In addition to managing a business with 107 dogs, Hoffman also sells real estate and runs her own virtual skincare line.

Her biggest challenge is managing day-to-day changes because of the variables from guest personalities to how the dogs are doing. In the face of many changes and surprises, Hoffman said, "you've got to be ready to pivot." The challenges are easily balanced by the reward of seeing the smiles on her guests' faces when they're out on the dogsleds experiencing this forgotten way of life. There is something about the pure joy that the dogs exude that is contagious to anyone observing. Hoffman describes the peace and serenity of a dogsled ride as a place where the only thing heard is the dogs' paws in the snow. This experience allows people to take a break from their phones and computers and reunite with nature.

Hoffman was planning to come to our 25th reunion last spring that was unfortunately canceled due to the pandemic, and she tries to make it back to St. Louis at least every summer to visit her family and see friends. She is grateful for social media, which allows her to follow friends and family and stay in touch. She does occasionally see **Helen Chamness Bruellman '95**, who lives in the area. Hoffman said, "I miss St. Louis at times, but I wouldn't trade it for what I get to do every day and where I get to be in the mountains. I just can't imagine living in a city again." It sounds like Hoffman's heart belongs right where she is: in the mountains with her family and her dogs.



01. Guests learn to mush on the Hoffmans' 12.5 mile trail outside of Steamboat, Colorado.

02. Hadley and Hunter Hoffman enjoy their own, child-sized sled.