THE LAST GREAT RACE

Mother and musher Jody Potts-Joseph blazes a new trail and becomes the first Han Gwich'in woman to race in the Iditarod.

By **Maya McLeroy**
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Before reaching the wide expanse of frozen Yukon River, Jody Potts-Joseph must take care of her dogs. In a small Alaskan village out in the bush, on the land of the Han Gwich'in people, a yard explodes with excitement. Alaskan Huskies yip and topple all over each other, a whirl of brown fur and pink tongues. When Potts-Joseph approaches them, the yips get louder. She kneels and holds a dog's face in her hands.

"We're best friends, huh," she says, then slides a bright blue bootie on each paw.

With wind blowing and the temperature 40 degrees below, Potts-Joseph is layered in multiple coats and fur hides. Her long black hair falls in a braid down her back. The scene that's unfolding is a routine one, but this year, every time she clipped her dogs' harnesses onto her sled, the action carried a different kind of weight.

This year, she trained for the Iditarod, a race nearly 1,000 miles across Alaska.

Potts-Joseph is a mother, hunter, dog musher, and community leader. She is an activist, Ironman, and traditional tattoo practitioner. She has been an English teacher in Mongolia, a wildland firefighter, and a National Geographic reality TV star. And in March 2026, she became the first woman of the Han Gwich'in tribe to race in the Iditarod.

Boasting the slogan of "The Last Great Race on Earth," the Iditarod carves through open tundra and boreal forests, under the shadow of mountain ranges and along stretches of coast. The race routes alternate between odd and even years, and some years the routes change dramatically due to weather conditions and changing climates. Traditionally, all races start in Anchorage and end in Nome, a small town on Alaska's most western point that juts against the Bering Sea.

Beginning the first weekend in March and lasting between one and two weeks, the Iditarod occurs just before spring's arrival. The first race took place in 1973, and followed a similar route from 1925, when mushers relayed life-saving medicine from Anchorage to the people in Nome suffering from a diphtheria outbreak.

For Potts-Joseph, dog mushing is more than just recreation or sport. Living outside of the road system for most of the year, she uses mushing as a mode of transportation. She and her husband Jamey Joseph run dog mushing trips through their business Raven Clan Kennels. Most importantly, it allows her to connect with her indigeneity and the land.

"I always knew [my mom] was going to do the Iditarod," says Potts-Joseph's daughter, Quannah Chasinghorse. "For everyone else, it's a sport. But for us, it's a way of life."

Though 2026 may have marked her first Iditarod, Potts-Joseph had been preparing for this race her entire life.

She grew up in the basket of a dog sled. Her parents, Mike Potts and Adeline Juneby Potts, led a subsistence lifestyle. Travelling by dog sled was as normal as suburban kids being strapped into strollers. Despite subzero temperatures, Potts-Joseph remembers feeling warm, bundled next to her brother in sleeping bags.

Her mom rarely travelled in the sled. Her chosen mode of transportation was by snowshoe, walking ahead of the dog team and breaking trail, sometimes up to 70 miles at a time.

"We're a matriarchy, so having strong women is nothing uncommon," says Potts-Joseph. "My mom has always just been kind of a badass."

The dream to one day race in the Iditarod appeared in Potts-Joseph's mind in the 80's. While living in Eagle Village in the third grade, her school principal Terry McMullin raced in the Iditarod. Seeing someone from her hometown reach that level of competitive mushing made her believe someday she could as well.

In being the first Han Gwich'in woman and sixth Alaska Native woman to ever race in the Iditarod, she hopes to keep mushing alive in Indigenous youth. As reliance on snowmobiles has grown, Potts-Joseph chooses not to abandon this way of life.



Jody Potts-Joseph sets off at the official restart of the 2026 Iditarod.



"There's a lot of really important aspects of our culture, [and one of those] is respect," she says. "Respect for the land and the animals, relatives, elders, and even respect for ourselves. You know, that can sometimes be harder than anything else, and so I'm going to have to learn to take care of myself on the trail."

This desire to push her body to cover long distances did not start with the Iditarod. Potts-Joseph says training for the Iditarod made her Ironmans seem "like a cake walk," but she still remembers an early morning before an Ironman in San Diego. The surf looked unforgiving, with big waves crashing against the shoreline. She wondered how she'd ever make it through that section of tumultuous surf.

Her uncle Dan told her fear was not an option, and she turned his advice into a mantra, repeating the words until she believed they were true.

"Strength is part of my personal constitution," she says.

Belonging to a long lineage of strong women, Potts-Joseph raised her three children — Denali, Quannah, and Izzy — on her own for most of their lives.

"She's shaped me into who I am," says Chasinghorse. "I didn't grow up with a father figure, so she pulled the weight of both."

When hunting and fishing, Potts-Joseph and her kids never used ATVs, and instead hiked out for miles, stuffing everything they needed into backpacks. They could be hunting for days, then would carry everything back on foot. According to Chasinghorse, there was no other woman who was doing that on her own.

Taking after her mom, Chasinghorse began to advocate for Indigenous rights from an early age. Her activism was soon recognized by modeling scouts, landing her a gig with Calvin Klein. When Chasinghorse first attended the Met Gala in 2019, her mom accompanied her to New York City. Potts-Joseph wiped tears from her eyes as she watched her daughter draped in gold, turquoise pendants adorning her ears.

Gracing the cover of *Vogue* and closing runway shows in Paris, Chasinghorse is acutely aware of the lack of Native people in the fashion world. When she feels lost in the concrete walls of Los Angeles, she finds peace coming home to Alaska and her mom.

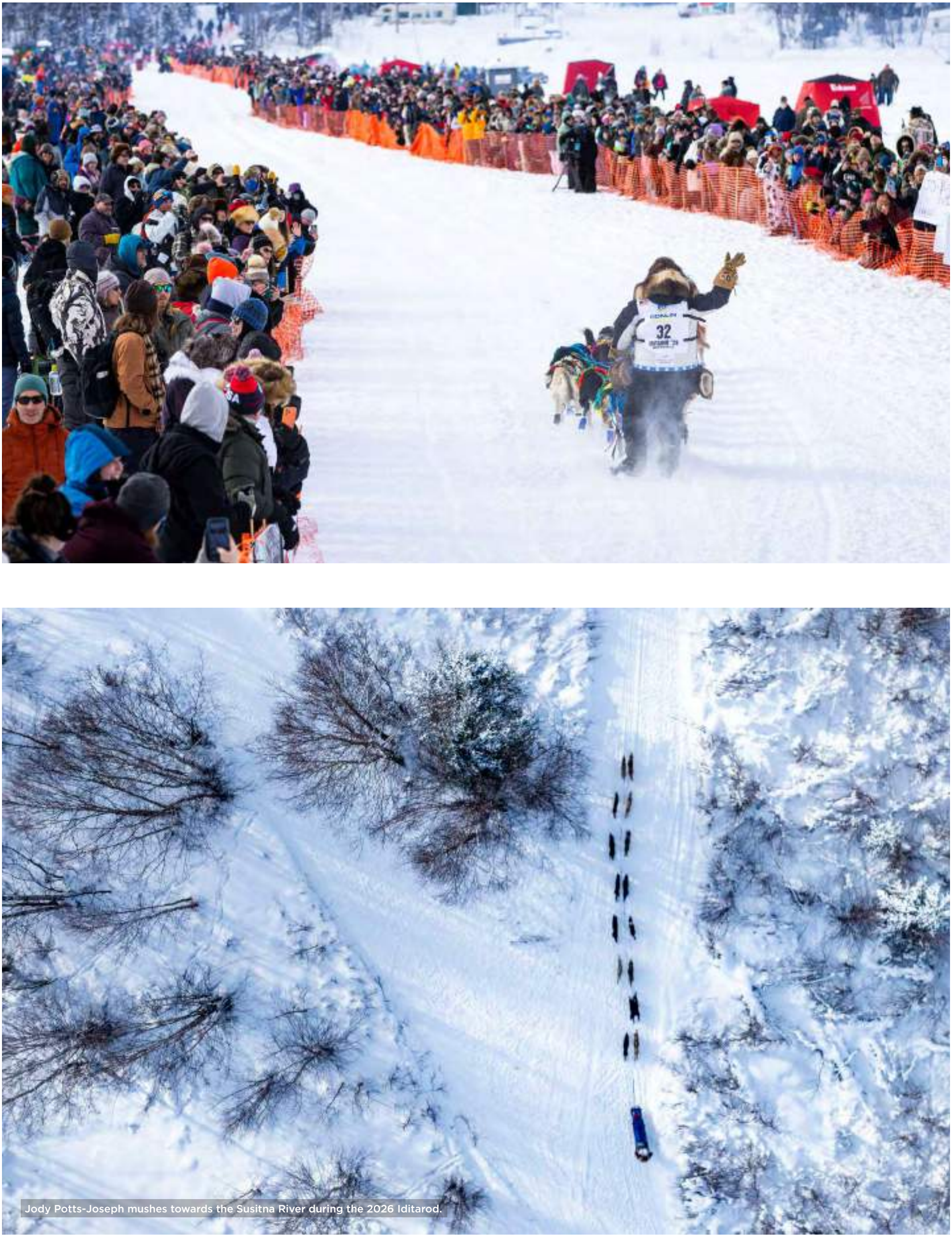
Their bond can be seen in the three, thin lines that run down their chin. Dating back over 10,000 years, Yidįįłtoo are the traditional stick-and-poke facial tattoos Han Gwich'in women receive as rites of passage. Colonization stripped away this history, banning Alaska Natives from wearing traditional tattoos. Potts-Joseph tattooed Chasinghorse when she was 14 years old, making her the first girl in over 100 years to wear Yidįįłtoo. A few months later, Potts-Joseph received tattoos of her own, given to her by her son.

As a tattoo artist, Potts-Joseph does not charge Native women for their tattoos. Instead, they make trades, exchanging permanent ink for beadwork or medicine. Potts-Joseph begins each tattooing session with intention, having conversations regarding what the tattoos mean, and how to respond to both the ignorance and curiosity that causes people to ask questions.

"[My mom] would tell us, 'We may not have everything, but we are so rich in our culture,'" says Chasinghorse. "Indigenous knowledge teaches humility. It teaches humanity, which a lot of people seem to have forgotten about. We don't have the privilege to forget."

"In Walking Two Worlds", a 2022 documentary produced by The North Face following Chasinghorse, Potts-Joseph says, "I talk to my kids a lot about being raised in two worlds. [There is] our Indigenous way of life and our values but also being able to conform and proceed in this modern world." Potts-Joseph moved her family to Fairbanks for her kids' schooling. While living in the city, she met her now husband, Joseph. A few years later, they returned to Eagle Village, and Potts-Joseph's passion returned with it.

"She hadn't even unpacked all her bags fully before she started mushing again," says Chasinghorse.



Jody Potts-Joseph mushes towards the Susitna River during the 2026 Iditarod.

Jody Potts-Joseph prepares for the Iditarod ceremonial start in a prayer circle led by her mom, Adeline Juneby Potts.

The sled is a place Potts-Joseph can truly feel free and return to her senses. Always scanning the environment around her, she actively participates with the world rushing by, looking for next year's Christmas tree or following fresh tracks in the snow. She watches her dogs' gaits, listening to the patter of paws hitting the ground.

"One of the reasons I really like dog mushing is because I feel much more connected with our land, and I feel like part of this team with my dogs," says Potts-Joseph.

She has nearly 30 dogs in her kennel and has raised most of them since birth. The dogs are an amalgamation of multicolored coats, some the shade of sand with piercing blue eyes, others spotted black and white. Potts-Joseph makes up part of the athlete equation, and her dogs the rest.

Coki, Natrah, Loki, Bodil, Lebowski, Stoller, Sunny, Revna, Ninjuu, Freya, Ginger, Anna, Stormy, Kobuk, Coconut, and Blaze made up the team of dogs that set out on the trail with Potts-Joseph.

"I love them like they're my kids," says Potts-Joseph. "They need a lot of love but also discipline. It's good for them to have structure."

Potts-Joseph and her dogs have developed their own shared language with Potts-Joseph walking a fine line between athlete and coach. Sometimes, she shares pictures and videos of her dogs on social media. In an Instagram post, she filmed two parallel columns of dogs running in unison, the winter sun casting a warm, yellow glow across the snow. In the caption, she wrote, "Do something good for yourself: get outside and just be present. Take it in. Find the magic."

Mushing is how Potts-Joseph finds the magic.

Two days before the ceremonial start of the Iditarod, over 1,000 people flocked to the Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center in Downtown Anchorage to meet this year's mushers. Potts-Joseph stood at a small table with her name. In the 90-minute meet and greet, the line to meet her never ended.

Miss Alaska 2025 weaved through the crowd, her glimmering tiara poking above most people's heads. A fan from Michigan wore a Hawaiian shirt, but instead of hibiscus or plumeria flowers decorating the fabric, the shirt was covered in husky faces overlaid onto a map of Alaska. A woman walked wide-eyed through the room, 10 husky plushies attached to her backpack.

On the other side of the room stood Jessie Holmes, the back-to-back winner of the Iditarod. His constant line of fans resembled a tightly packed barricade, each one waiting for his autograph. In the mushing world, Holmes has reached the highest echelon of celebrity. Potts-Joseph and Holmes both appeared on National Geographic's reality TV show, Life Below Zero: First Alaskans. But their relationship runs deeper than simply being co-stars. For years, the two mushers have learned from and worked with each other's dog teams. Potts-Joseph even made Holmes a pair of mukluk boots for this year's race.

When Potts-Joseph took a break from mushing while living in Fairbanks, she gave her lead dog to Holmes.

"My dogs go back to her dog, Flash, 15 years ago," said Holmes. "She's like a big sister to me."

On the eve of the Iditarod's ceremonial start in Anchorage, Potts-Joseph just wanted to get out on the trail.

"I've had enough of this town stuff," she said, smiling.

After dragging her bright blue sled into the hotel lobby, the smell of hay permeated the air. She sewed patches onto her sled, first placing a red circle patch adorned with "No More Stolen Sisters" in capital letters. Potts-Joseph is an advocate for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), speaking at rallies and sharing information on missing women on her social media pages. Native women face murder rates more than 10 times the national average, and Potts-Joseph has members of her own community who have gone missing.

Potts-Joseph's mom grabbed a patch and started sewing as well.

"I can't believe she's doing this," said her mom under her breath. "Actually, I can. This is how we raised her."

As the patches accumulated, Potts-Joseph strapped homemade snowshoes strung together with moose sinew on either side of her sled. Pulling out a pile of beaded, colorful fabric, Potts-Joseph held up the jackets her dogs would wear at the start of the race.

In an Instagram post shared in December, Potts-Joseph asked for artists across Alaska and Canada to make traditional Athabascan dog jackets. In just one post, she received messages from enough women to make jackets for all 16 of her dogs.

The jackets represent the love and care Potts-Joseph has for her dogs, as well as for the villages they pass through. Traditionally, the jackets — each telling a unique story — were used as a display of respect. She plans on passing them on to future Native mushers.

At one point, a woman walked into the hotel lobby holding a dog jacket she made. Adorned in beaded images of caribou, it was a tribute to the animal integral to the Han Gwich'in way of life. Potts-Joseph hugged her, then invited her to join the circle of women making last minute touches on the jackets.

Most of what Potts-Joseph wore during the race, she and her mom made themselves, from beaver mittens to homemade mukluks to a martin hat. If it wasn't Native made, it was made by The North Face.

"Quannah, don't judge," said Potts-Joseph as she shrugged on her custom North Face parka, catwalking through the hotel lobby. She posed, then turned, strutting in the opposite direction. Potts-Joseph looked in her element.

"I'll put you on my fantasy mushing team!" said a woman wheeling her suitcase through the room.

In the lobby of the Lakefront Hotel, a stream of people came and went, all revolving like planets around Potts-Joseph's sun.



Sunny, one of Jody Potts-Joseph's Iditarod sled dogs, waits to be fed in the days leading up to the race.



Quannah Chasinghorse, Jody Potts-Joseph's daughter, shares a moment with sled dog Stormy before the ceremonial start.





On the morning of the ceremonial start of the Iditarod, downtown Anchorage was coated in a layer of fresh snow. As the mushers headed into their slots, dim morning light clung to the squat downtown buildings. A steady stream of Iditarod volunteers with clipboards and hand-warmers ran up and down the streets, directing traffic, while the musher trucks were getting stuck because of all the snow.

The weather for this year's start, 18 degrees Fahrenheit and snowing, was light work for Potts-Joseph and her dogs. Some dogs stood outside beneath the falling snow, while others stayed in the truck.

Potts-Joseph's mom called the group to join in prayer. They clasped arms and hands, forming a circle, snow falling on bowed heads. Asking for protection and safety, voices fell into other voices, all praying for the same thing: that their daughter, mother, friend, and wife have a safe journey.

Potts-Joseph placed sweetgrass and cedar into her sled, calling it medicine. Minutes before mounting her sled to travel 11 miles through downtown Anchorage, Potts-Joseph popped into her truck to do some last-minute sewing on a dog jacket. Since she pulled bib number 32, she was one of the last mushers to set out on the trail, with Chasinghorse following in a sled behind her, waving to throngs of fans lining the streets.

The Iditarod banner was lowered almost as suddenly as it appeared as both tourists and Anchorage natives gathered to commemorate the start of the race. But for Potts-Joseph and the other 36 competitive mushers, the race truly started the next day, 70 miles north on Willow Lake.

At the official restart of the Iditarod, above the din of dogs barking and howling in anticipation of setting off on the trail, bells sounded. Adorned in jewel tones, beaded and tasseled labors of love from Athabascan women across Alaska, the dogs of Raven Clan Kennels sported bells attached to the jackets, clanging as they leaped and lunged in their harnesses.

For a few hours, the air brimmed with anticipation. Potts-Joseph pulled on homemade mukluks over thick socks, followed by snowshoes. She stroked each dog's head, sipped tea from her thermos, and called her family into the trailer. Potts-Joseph stood with her mother, daughter, and husband in a tight circle, sharing a moment together before she set off on her own.

As the barking built into a crescendo, a volunteer walked over and said, "You have two minutes."

Potts-Joseph mounted the sled and pulled the brake from the snow. A line of dog handlers held the dogs by their harnesses. It took all their strength to hold the dogs back.

These dogs, like their musher, were ready to race.

The team pulled Potts-Joseph through the parking lot and up to the starting chute. As she passed through the chute, her mom reached both arms out to her.

Almost 1,000 miles stretched out before Potts-Joseph and her dogs. They made up a kaleidoscope of beaded figures as they crossed frozen lakes.

A few days into the race, Potts-Joseph rounded a corner and came face to face with a hulking, brown bison in the middle of the trail. It lowered its head, then pawed at the ground. Charging the dog team, it stopped short and circled. It charged again, and again, and again, always stopping right before reaching the dogs.

Potts-Joseph pulled out her pistol and tried to fire a warning shot, but her gun jammed. All it let out was *click, click, click, click*.

She leapt off the sled and stood behind a spruce tree, throwing sticks in the animal's direction, but the bison would not move. Potts-Joseph suddenly remembered a story her grandmother once told her. Once when Potts-Joseph's mom and her siblings were playing outside a grizzly bear wandered into their backyard. Her grandmother brought her kids inside and then walked straight up to the bear and said a phrase in her native language which translated to, "Go away. Have mercy on us. Leave us alone."

The bear turned and hauled its body away. So did the bison decades later when Potts-Joseph repeated those words on the Iditarod Trail.

There were more than 20 checkpoints along the trail, all of which were equipped with veterinarians and supplies. Prior to the race, mushers sent drop bags to checkpoints. In Potts-Joseph's case, the bags were filled with salmon and homemade moose soup. When racing, mushers are mostly in charge of when to rest and when to keep pushing, but the race rules enforced two eight-hour resting stops and one 24-hour stop.

Near the checkpoint in Nikolai, about a third of the way into the race, one of Potts-Joseph's dogs started showing minor signs of kennel cough, a highly contagious respiratory virus. Veterinarians prescribed the dog antibiotics, and Potts-Joseph and her team continued to push on.

On her way to Unalakleet, Potts-Joseph noticed her dogs lagging. Her lead dogs refused to eat, having contracted a stomach virus. Rolling into checkpoints in the middle of the night, Potts-Joseph would lay down on her stomach and massage her dogs' legs, give them medicine for their kennel cough, then wrap them in blankets. Only after the dogs were taken care of, could she truly rest.

On the morning of March 17, Potts-Joseph scratched herself from the Iditarod. Her team of 10 remaining dogs were sick. All dogs except one either refused to eat or had developed a severe case of kennel cough. On mile 658, Potts-Joseph decided it was too risky to push her dogs any longer.

Though Potts-Joseph did not make it to the finish line, she still made history by making it to the start. This trail was carved out long before her. For Potts-Joseph, the Iditarod was a continuation, not the starting point. And she already plans on returning to the race next year.

Come late summer, when the light still hangs into the evening, she will be out on the land, mushing her dogs and living in alignment with her vision — not to hold the title of champion, but to continue the tradition of her ancestors, and to keep the trail clear.

Adeline Juneby Potts says goodbye to her daughter before the official restart.