

Lawyer Leads North Pole Trek

All-woman group will break new ground.

By Naseem Stecker

Blistering winds, treacherous ice and snow, sun, fog, and frigid temperatures that plunge below 35 degrees Fahrenheit characterize arctic weather—a desolate environment so harsh that few animals can survive there. Yet, this is the destination chosen for an expedition by 11 women who want to make it to the top of the planet at True North.

Strapped with 25-pound backpacks and pulling 45-pound sleds loaded with supplies, they will attempt a 130-mile journey on skis that will take them from the 88th parallel in Russia to the North Pole.

Led by lawyer and Michigan State University journalism professor Sue Carter, this ambitious expedition in April will mark the first time that an all-woman group will reach the pole from Russia.

“This will be a life-defining moment,” said Carter, possibly the first woman JD to lead such a group to the North Pole.

Beyond the physical and mental challenges of the venture, the women are hoping to inspire others to act to achieve their goals. “To make a statement, sometimes it requires an extraordinary effort and in fact these are fairly ordinary women doing an extraordinary thing,” Carter said. “If we want to be a model, to give inspiration to others, the best way to do that is through action—by setting out an unusual goal—and we’re working and planning through teamwork and training to do it.”

In Carter’s opinion this expedition is really about a generation of women who have benefited from the sacrifices made by the generation before them. “We have a responsibility on our shoulders to pass along those opportunities and not to simply say, well, we’ve made it, why should we worry about those behind us? It’s critical that we keep extending a hand to the next generation.”

The idea for the trek came from Frida Waara, a filmmaker from Marquette who



Sue Carter in training.

wanted to document the expedition. Waara said the North Pole appealed to her because she’s decidedly Nordic. “Winter is my favorite season and snow is the all-time best toy. I’ve been skiing since I could walk. As a videographer, I’ve learned to keep my cameras working in the cold. So why not?” Waara asked. “I’m not real good at altitudes; I’m definitely a flatlander. I love to camp, and I figure that this way there won’t be any bugs.”

Carter said she became aware of the expedition through a newsletter put out by the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences six years ago. “There was a little item in it that said, ‘Frida Waara of Marquette is planning to go to the North Pole.’ I read that and said not without me she’s not! I called her and the discussions began.”

The women formed their own nonprofit foundation called WomanQuest to expand the horizons of girls and women and began to recruit members. Carter says her training as a lawyer was critical in filing the corporate

papers and seeking the nonprofit status. “It’s been immeasurably valuable in things like copyright and trademark. So I actually have used some of the things I teach, which is wonderful. This would have been much more difficult were I not a lawyer.”

Each woman is paying \$10,000 per person for this expedition, but donations to WomanQuest will help offset the total costs for the team members. Besides Waara and Carter, the Michigan group includes Kerri Finlayson, who teaches anthropology and sociology at North Central Michigan College in Petoskey; Phyllis Grummon, a director of university planning at MSU; Susan Martin, an eighth-grade science teacher from Boyne City; and Lynn Bartley, associate principal at Haslett High School. Other team members are Kathy Braegger from Idaho; Anne Sherwood, a freelance photographer based in Montana; and Carter Walker, a freelance journalist from Montana. Canadian Josee Auclair and Siberian Jennifer Buck will guide the expedition and serve as captains. The women range in age from 27 to 51. Some are married with children and others single.

During the journey, team members will be in touch with schools in the U.S. and Canada through satellite transmissions that will detail the team’s progress. “We have a curriculum of four or five lessons that will go up on the Web prior to our departure so that students can get a sense of what we are doing. It’s adaptable for classrooms,” Carter said. Team members will also produce a CD-ROM for middle school students that will focus on the arctic environment and an online game for girls that will recreate the trek. They will shoot a video documentary about their experiences and produce publications for both the mass media and academia. The women will also be collecting air samples for MSU and field-test clothes, shelter, and navigation equipment.



To prepare for the journey, the group has been training in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. A noted arctic explorer from Russia, Mikhail Malakhov, joined the women in January to help them work on skiing techniques. “The training itself is intense and widespread. It involves ultimately strength and endurance and the ability to function in the cold. In the warmer months we’ve been biking, running, and now that it’s colder, a lot of skiing,” Carter said. Group members have also been camping out and living on the trail.

When they get to the arctic, the plan is to ski about ten miles each day. “There will be days when we will be able to achieve that and more. Then there will be other days when we’ll be going over rubble ice that can be as high as 30 feet. We just won’t make more than a couple of miles a day,” Carter said.

To prepare mentally for the trip, Carter draws inspiration from the golfer Tiger Woods. “What he does is he images the shots that he takes, the putts that he makes.

So, part of what I think any athlete does—and this involves a fair amount of athleticism—is imaging. Imagining yourself doing this, living the reality, creating the reality so that you can move into that new reality. I think a lot of it is understanding what you will be going into. For 11 people to get along together, it requires respect, teamwork, and the ability to know when anyone of us gets a little too hot and we all have that capacity. But we have stressed from the beginning that there are no lone rangers here, there are no solo efforts. It’s a team effort.”

The group will be living on food that will have been prepared ahead of time and hydrated or even freeze-dried. A typical breakfast will include oatmeal with fruit and nuts, butter, brown sugar, maple syrup, and coffee or tea. During the day, only short stops are planned. Lunch will be dried fruits, nuts, energy bars, beef jerky, and a hot beverage. In the evenings, there’ll be time for “Malakhov cocktails”—warm milk, maple syrup and

whiskey—a concoction named after their esteemed trainer. Dinner will usually be something substantial like pasta or stew.

The adventure will begin on April 3rd, when the women will meet in Moscow and then fly to northern Russia for final training before starting their two-week long journey to the North Pole.

Although the possibility of an encounter with polar bears is a fear, Carter says the animals prefer more southern locations. “I think in the event of unforeseen problems we can rise to the occasion. There is a lot of redundancy on the team. We specifically designed it that way so that if there’s a medical emergency, there are several of us who can provide various levels of help. If there’s a communication problem, several of us are good at communicating and using the equipment. So it’s not to say that there won’t be difficulties, but I think they are all surmountable.” ◆

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