



P.O. Box 84 Willow, Alaska 99688
Phone: 907-841-1603 * Email: Nicole@teamineka.com
www.TeamIneka.com * Team Ineka on Facebook at: [Facebook.com/teamineka](https://www.facebook.com/teamineka)

Nicole Forto: A Teen Mushing Down A Dream to the Junior Iditarod

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(Willow, AK)—While most teenagers are thinking about what movie to catch at the mall or what outfit to wear out with their friends, 17-year-old Nicole Forto is thinking about insulated clothing, food rations, check points, and her beloved sled dogs—all 36 of them! Nicole, who is a senior at Houston High School in Alaska, and a junior musher is busy getting prepared to run her family’s team of Siberian and Alaskan Huskies under the Team Ineka banner in the Junior Iditarod that kicks off on Saturday, February 28 from her home town of Willow. This is Nicole’s second run in the popular race, and last year, she was the recipient of the Red Lantern award, which goes to the last team crossing the finish line. According to Gypsy at the *Iditarod Education Portal* (www.iditarod.com), the Red Lantern “is a symbol of perseverance and mushers feel a sense of pride and accomplishment when receiving it.”

Nicole says, “As the Junior Iditarod is just a few short weeks away, the ‘pre-game’ jitters are already forming. I’m both excited and nervous about the race. I ran the Junior Iditarod once before, but it still feels like the very first time. I want this year’s race to be the best racing experience for both my dogs and I since this is my last year in junior racing.

The Junior Iditarod is a 150-mile dog race in South Central Alaska. It is a qualifier for the Iditarod for junior mushers ages 12 to 17 years old. And with the race right around the corner, Nicole admits that, “It feels like I have to be frantic and rushing to get

everything picture perfect for the starting line! Then I remember to just take a deep breath and have as much fun as I possibly can.”

Nicole’s main sponsors for the race are the FiveSibes™, Alaska Spirit Crafts, The Upholstery Gallery, Alaska Dog Works, and the Willow Elementary First Grade Class.

The beautiful snowy Alaskan trails are where Nicole loves to be. She enjoys her time with the family Huskies that she helps train along with her parents, mushers and canine behaviorists, Robert and Michele. Nicole says she is truly looking forward to the race and to running her lead dogs, Frosty and TyTy, no matter if she comes in first, tenth, or last. And Nicole appreciates the valuable lessons one learns while out on the trail. “Mushing...has shown me that believing in yourself and pushing through the good and bad times is where you measure how successful you are,” states Nicole. “My dogs run thousands of miles never giving up on me and I will never give up on them. Mushing has shown me that the word ‘quit’ is no longer in my vocabulary.” Read more about Nicole’s thoughts on success and the journey of a Junior Iditarod musher in her article “Measurement of Success” posted on Tracy R. Williams’ AlaskaTracy.com blog.

Even though Nicole will be hanging up her junior sled after this year’s race and beginning life as a college freshman at the University of Alaska in Anchorage come fall, maybe one day her name will be among the great mushers of “The Last Great Race” itself—the Iditarod. But, in the meantime, Nicole is simply looking forward to this, her final Junior run.

“I hope to have a time-of-my-life experience out on the frozen trails of Alaska with my team,” she says with a smile.

To learn more about Nicole and the Forto mushing family, visit www.TeamIneka.com.

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Photos and videos upon request