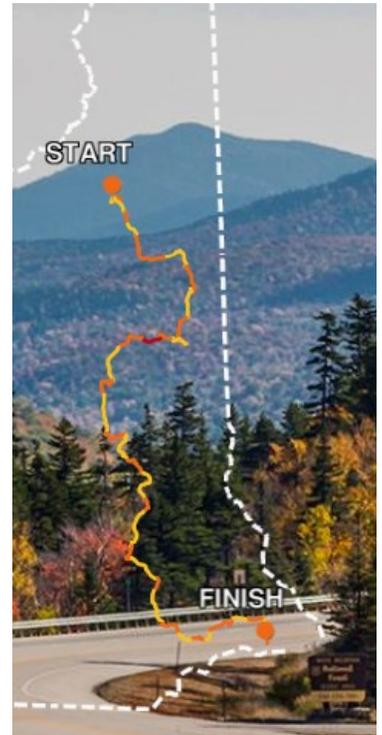




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### Running in Someone Else's Shoes: Kim McCracken, NRCS Soil Scientist, is Member of First Visually Impaired Team of Ragnar Relay Ultra Runners



“I learned a lot about trust”, said Kim McCracken, NH NRCS State Soil Scientist, summing up her most recent long-distance race, the Ragnar “Reach the Beach” relay race starting at Bretton Woods and ending at Hampton Beach after over 200 miles and two days, including running through the night. Kim loves running, developing her passion for the sport only ten years ago. Since then, she’s run nine



marathons, including two Boston Marathons and one New York Marathon and well over 100 road races, but this one was unique because this time, Kim and eleven other accomplished long distance runners, became the first Ragnar Relay “ultra team” nationwide comprised of visually impaired runners and their guides.

Left to Right: Kyle Robidoux (Kim’s partner) of Roxbury, MA, Kim McCracken of Durham, NH, Randy Pierce of Nashua, NH, Peter Houde of Somersworth, NH, Hannah DeFelice of Boston, MA, William McElroy of Portsmouth, NH, Keith Levitsky of Brentwood, NH, Shawn Chesire of Malden, MA (replaced by Alison Lynch of NYC, not pictured), Mark Ryder of Portsmouth, NH, and Brian Switzer of Easton, MA.

Kim participated in this race before, even winning the women’s “over 40” division with



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a team of twelve in 2014, but not as part of an “ultra team” where usually half the number of people comprise the team, requiring each member to run at least twice as far. In the case of Kim’s current team with sight impaired runners with guides, there are still 12 people on the team, but because two people have to run each leg at the same time, each runner averages a total of 35 miles with relay legs ranging from two to eleven miles each.

When Pete Houde, the President of the Coastal Athletic Association asked Kim to be on this team, she jumped at the opportunity, because she is a self-proclaimed “endurance junkie” who always wanted to run on an ultra team. Kim was also inspired by Pete and his wife, Christine, who had done a lot of guiding before, even for the Boston Marathon, but she didn’t yet understand the challenges faced by sight impaired runners or the incredible experience this run would become.



Brian Switzer and Mark Ryder

Pete Houde’s main “running buddy” is local celebrity Randy Pierce, a sight impaired UNH graduate who, in addition to being a long-distance runner, has hiked all of the forty-eight 4,000 foot mountains in NH. Pete and Randy hatched the idea of putting together this team back in December. Since then, they recruited other runners linked with the MA Association for Blind and Visually Impaired to contact other runners. Shawn Chesire of Malden, MA originally recruited for this team, had to pull out to participate in the Para Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Jason Romero of Denver, Colorado, had just finished running across the country and is now in Greece running the Spartathlon 800 mile race.



Kim McCracken and Kyle Robidoux

The only actual pre-race running training Kim did with her partner, Kyle Robidoux, was a four mile run on a grueling 100 degree day in Boston. While Kim learned that their pairing was ideal because they were well-matched based on historical pace, she soon began to understand the magnitude of her role to make sure Kyle ran the race safely. She learned to guide him with a shoelace tied in a circle when he needed to move to the left. To go right, she pushed her forearm against Kyle’s and said “right”. When obstacles arose, she would first call out the obstacle, saying, for example, “pothole” and then “one, two, three, pothole” again, timing the last word for the exact moment Kyle was at the obstacle. The team also all got together for a pizza/slumber party at Pete’s house the night before the event to get to know each other better.



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The race started at 11:00 a.m. in Bretton Woods on Friday, September 16<sup>th</sup> and ran for thirty hours straight through the night. Kyle and Kim’s first leg of the relay was eleven miles on Rt. 302 ending at Attitash. They ran two legs in the dark for a total of ten miles from White Lake State Park and through downtown Laconia at about 2:30 a.m. They were in sync and communicated well, so there were no problems as they ran. However, that doesn’t mean that it didn’t take a great deal of trust on Kyle’s part to embark upon this endeavor. Kim said, “we were running through Laconia in the dark with large semis driving by us; I don’t think I would have trusted anyone to lead me through that, but Kyle trusted me and that was an intense responsibility”. Most of the time, however, Kim said “it was like running with any other running buddy, talking about other races we’d done, what we’d trained for, about our families, etc. We had a lot of time to just talk and get to know each other.” They ran six legs and were the

final runners on the team, running along the beach and crossing the finished line. Kim said, “I have run this race a bunch of times, but I haven’t been the finishing runner before. Usually, there are a few family members and friends welcoming you at the end, but this time, there were approximately seventy people cheering and taking photos of us at the finish line. It was an emotional experience.”

Kim estimates it took at least 500 volunteers to make this race a success. There are 36 transition zones, all needing staff to help where the bracelets are exchanged that go from one runner to the next on a team. Local community groups also do other fundraising at these transition zones offering food and drinks for sale or donation.



Hanna DeFelice

Reflecting on the experience, Kim recalled that several people said her running club was selfless, but her role paled in comparison to the trust it takes

L to R: Pete Houde, Randy Pierce, Keith Levitsky, Jason Romero of CO, Will McElroy, Kyle Robidoux, Hannah DeFelice, Kim McCracken, Scott Heffner, Brian Switzer, Mark Ryder, and Alison Lynch





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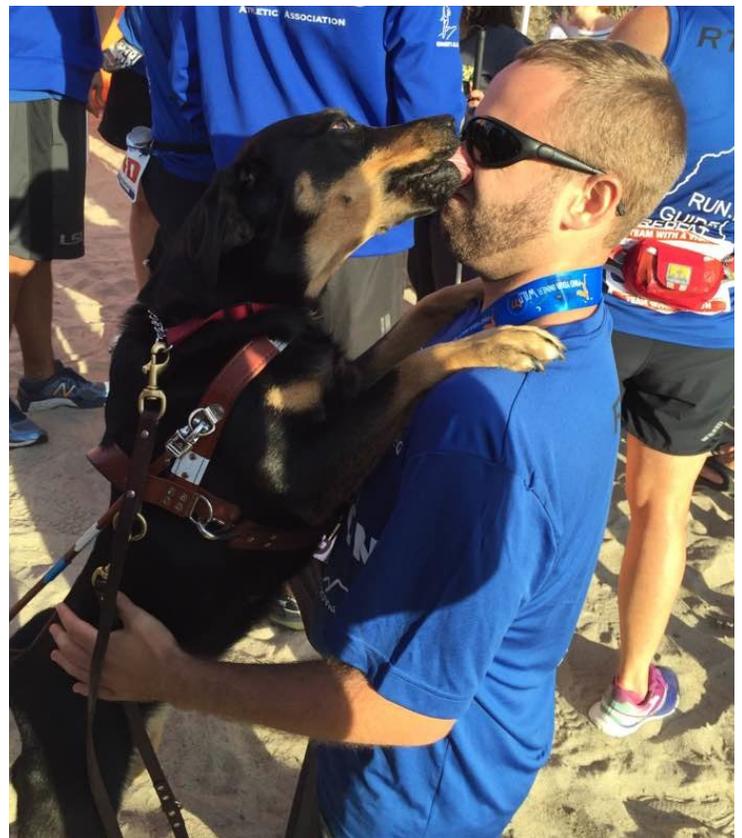
to let someone else run with you over trails and through traffic. “There was an incredible amount of trust in our team. I rode in a van with six people for 30 hours. There were no complaints or arguments. We were a team who supported each other day and night working together for a common goal. The part that got me was I only thought about the running at the beginning. But then I realized it was much more. When someone couldn’t find their bag, they needed help finding it. They were counting on me to help with all this stuff. I learned that some of them moved to large cities because they need public transportation and resources to get around. It’s too hard living where I do just to get a ride somewhere. The experience made me think about how I take my vision for granted and how many challenges these visually impaired people conquer every day while thriving doing everything everyone else is doing. Most importantly, these people are now just my friends.”

After the race, Kim signed up with [United in Stride](#), a program sponsored by the Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, to volunteer to run with people during training runs, to do more races, and encourages others to do the same. “These people love running just like me.”

[Video of Kim and Kyle.](#)

[Teamwork, Resilience Propel Team with a Vision Ultra Squad to Ragnar Finish Line](#), Mass Ultra Website, Sept. 24, 2016

[Reach the Beach Teams Running Together, United as One](#), Fosters On-line, Sept. 17, 2016



Brian Switzer and his service dog, Intrigue, are reunited after two days apart.