



A guide to finer living in  
Connecticut & abroad  
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## *Music, Mirth & Mojo*

### Black Bear Sled Dog, and “Expo-Sleigh”

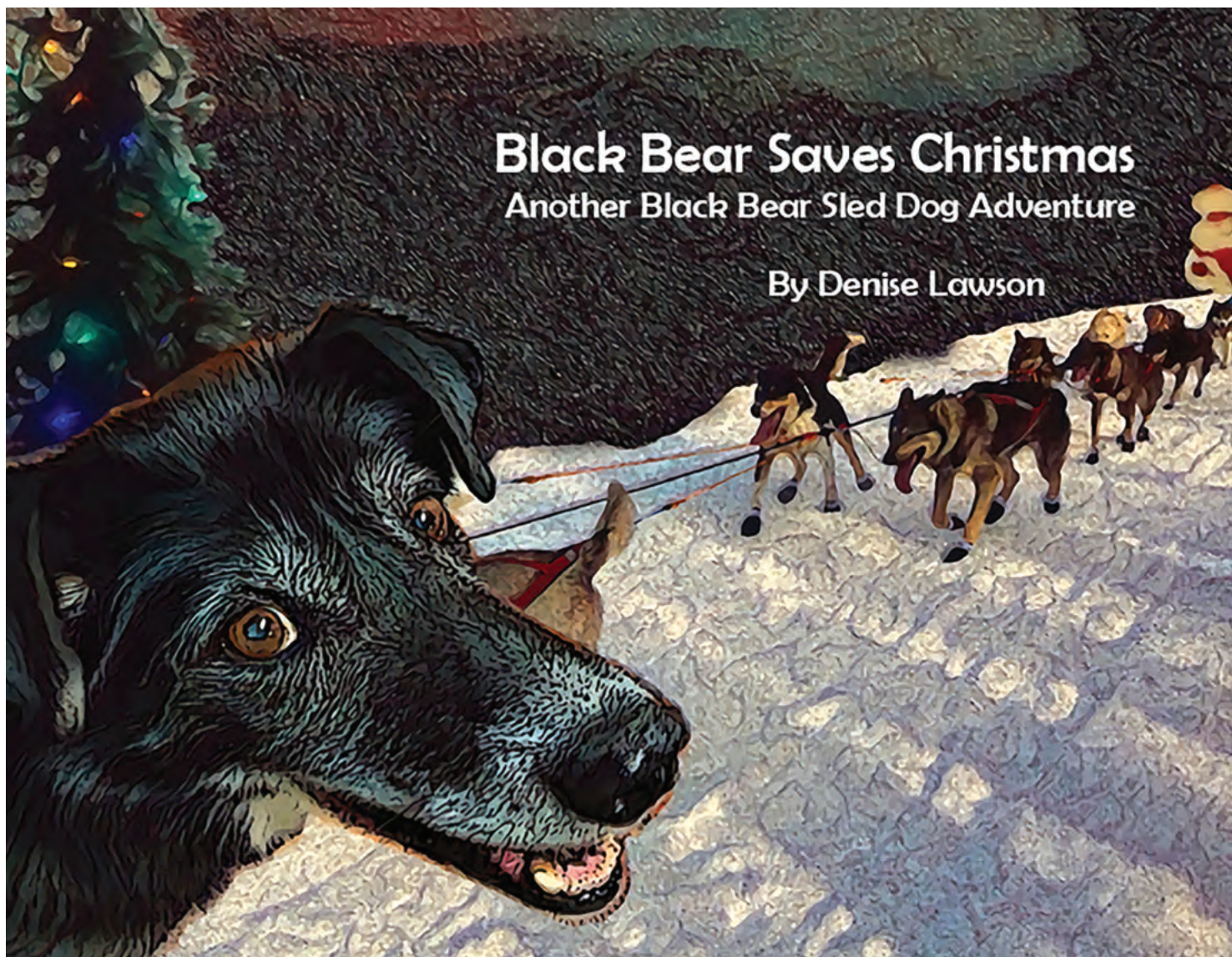
By Ali Kaufman / Photos by Denise Lawson

When Denise Lawson says she has a “bee in her bonnet” you have two choices - get on board or get out of the way. We met years ago when she was heading up a fundraiser in honor of her father’s first cousin, Allen Toussaint. In doing the interview with her I not only learned of her connection to the legendary New Orleans pianist but about other things on which she was passionately working. I was intrigued by how ideas became reality once Lawson set her sight on a project and how she manages to keep making a difference. With the recent release of her 6th

book about the adventures of her adopted sled dog, Black Bear, I thought it was high time I introduce her to you.

One of Allen Toussaint’s most indelible songs, “Southern Nights” stands as a musical history of Denise’s family gatherings during the summers when they would drive out to the country to visit relatives. Allen, and Denise’s father, Reginald J. Brown, grew up together in New Orleans and defied the odds by both becoming highly accomplished in their chosen field. Mr. Brown attended West Point and went on to achieve the

rank of Major in the Army. His life of public service continued as Assistant Secretary of the Army under President George W. Bush’s administration. Even with Allen Toussaint’s fame as a songwriter, performer, and ambassador of all things New Orleans, he was always involved in community as well. He and Aaron Neville founded NOAAHH – New Orleans Artists Against Hunger and Homelessness in 1985, which is still changing lives today. The combination of family ties, responsibility, and strong work ethic shaped Denise, spurring her on to turn challenges into opportunities.







their years in comfort. The reality of living in remote locations of Alaska means that food becomes a major factor for survival, they are dependent on the Salmon Run. Denise and Gordon were affected and enchanted by everything they were learning so adopting 11-year-old Black Bear made perfect sense.

One such challenge was Alaska. After dealing with health issues in her 40's, Denise faced her new decade by running a half marathon, introduced to the sport by Gordon, the gentleman who was becoming her other half. A trip to Alaska where she imagined terrors of all sorts, seemed like another mountain to climb. The fear of small planes, the wilderness, and dangerous cold were justified, but her conscious choice was to go forward because she could. I will add here that she's also done a swim from Alcatraz, another personal first that she took on without even a kiddie pool race of experience. She made it...because she could.

unison as well as with the musher, but all need to be 100% in. The natural cycle of life is another reason that necessitates re-homing as a dog reaches retirement age since 50° below zero temperatures are not exactly optimal. Denise makes a point of explaining "re-homing" as opposed to rescue, these dogs are not being mistreated, quite the contrary, the families want their dogs to live out

Born in Eagle Alaska, Black Bear had been the lead dog in the 2009 Yukon Quest and was now acclimating to life in Virginia. Things like stairs, glass doors, and all the sounds were new to Black Bear, but with her sweet nature and natural curiosity, she navigated her new world beautifully. So much so that she would insert

Pure joy is how Denise describes the site of the dogs running on the bank of the river, listening for commands from their musher to which they will instantaneously respond. It is evident why she connects so profoundly with this breed; they channel their energy and fortitude into persevering with an enthusiasm that speaks to her being. The sled dogs are working dogs, they do their part in the family to support the survival of all. Hunting and trapping, racing, different needs, call for dogs that fit the job, but all need a love of running. They also need to be physically able for the rigors of mushing, the families want what is best for their dogs. Dogs are not forced to run, the teams have a bond that allows them to work with each other in







herself into new situations and that's when it occurred to Denise that she could turn their story into teachable moments for others. Perhaps through these efforts, she could raise funds to offset the cost of re-homing more sled dogs. Thought led to action in the form of the first book, "Black Bear Goes to Washington," a children's book that I promise grownups will like too! The story chronicles

Black Bear as she learns about her new home while sharing what her life was like in Alaska. Through words and layered illustrations, we can glean a bigger message about working together, using our differences to strengthen our society, and making new friends. Five other hardcover books have followed, all with positive themes that open the door to conversation. "Life Lessons From a Sled Dog"

is especially good for anyone, no matter what your stage of life, this "older dog" might just teach you some new tricks.

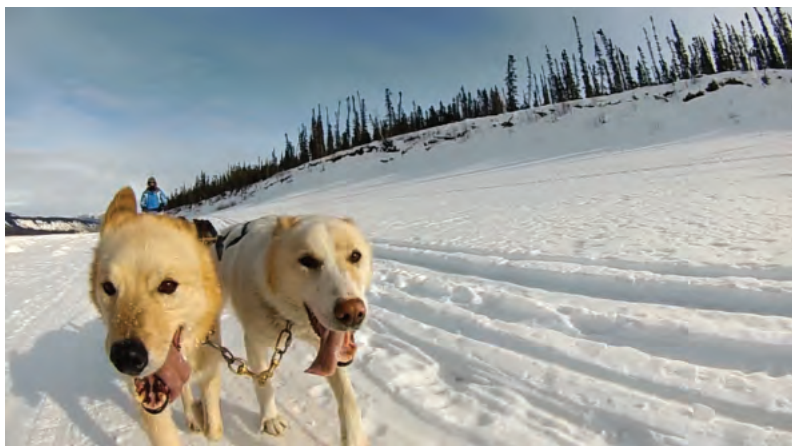
The books led to speaking engagements which have evolved into live programs where Denise educates her young audiences with Black Bear by her side and accompanying media by Gordon. I can hear a thrill in Denise's voice as







she describes those moments when she is in front of all those young faces, and they make the connection to how what she's sharing relates to the world at large. Covid has of course curtailed the larger groups she was booking, but just like so many of us, Denise and Gordon found a way to pivot. With schools closed, they got to know their neighbors, reading outdoors to pods of kids, complete with an appearance by reindeer antler-wearing sled dogs pulling Gordon on a bike. Zoom was a platform for storytime, and the games section that was added to the website proved very popular. Thankfully, things are opening up and dates are again being added to the calendar.



One event that will be ongoing is the Virtual Run Like A Sled Dog, where anyone can participate, they kindly interpret "run" very loosely. These efforts help offset the cost of transportation, food, and veterinary care for each dog's individual needs. Each adoption takes all the factors into consideration, you might be surprised at how affordable they are able to make the fee.

The larger dream of rehoming other sled dogs came into focus with several trips back to Alaska, concluding in the last-minute run to bring four back before the flights shut down. Each new arrival acclimates by living with Denise and Gordon in their Virginia home and is exposed to everyday life. The sled dog's transition is of such importance that through the relationships they've built they now start the process by meeting the dogs a year or more before retirement. While the median age is about 8-10 they also get dogs like 4-year-old Etta, she has a shoulder issue that makes it

pull no matter how much she might wish to do so. The main thing is that the right matches are made for dogs and families, all adoptions are handled lovingly on a case-by-case basis.

The Black Bear books are authored and illustrated by Denise, using a combination of hand-drawing and digital aid to create layers of texture. Much like how she lives her life, adding experience upon adventure. "Stories are everywhere when you see the world through the eyes of a sled dog," Denise imparted. The entire Black Bear Sled Dog series is published by Brown & Lowe Books which Denise shared is her own publishing company. The name is in honor of her father and mother, Brown for her Dad and her maiden name, Lowe, is her Mother's middle name.

So during this time when reindeer may leap to mind, I hope you'll have room for a tail of a different kind. One of good cheer, with gifts that keep giving all through the year!

*Information on all things Black Bear Sled Dog can be found by visiting [www.blackbearsledog.com](http://www.blackbearsledog.com)  
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