

September 13, 2020

The **Acadia Islands SwimRun**, an unprecedented endurance event, will take place on several outer islands off the southern coast of Mount Desert Island in early October. Mount Desert resident Aaron Long, in a fundraising effort for the Mount Desert Nursery School, will attempt to run 12 miles spread out over six different islands. How will he get to those islands to complete the runs? He'll swim the roughly five miles of ocean in between them.

As the Executive Director of the registered 501(c)(3) non-profit school, this particular effort hits very close to home. "Covid has eliminated our traditional fundraisers," Long said. "We typically try to raise funds through community gathering events, but those sort of things just are not possible right now. So, we've had to get creative and make it happen a different way."

MDNS has been an independent nursery school and child care program in Northeast Harbor for over 40 years. "That's pretty incredible if you think about it," Long said. "A small, independent non-profit in a small village on a small island in Maine. I think the longevity is a serious testament to our amazing island community businesses and individuals, and teachers past and present to create and implement the high quality program they have been able to sustain over the last several decades. I'm just hoping to do my part and set MDNS up for another 40 years."

Taking some out-of-the-box inspiration from Brooke Damon, Head Teacher at MDNS, and a recent effort put forth by Puranjot Kaur's attempted 44-mile swim around MDI, Long had to look within to pair the need for fundraising dollars with what he is personally capable of doing. "I'm nowhere near the swimmer that Puranjot is, but Brooke had a really good idea that got me thinking. I knew I wouldn't be able to do a 44-mile swim, but I do feel like I have some skills to do something epic."

After a competitive high school and collegiate career running cross country and track in his native Oregon, Long has been a runner most of his life. "I'll always be a runner, first and foremost. In a lot of ways, it's a big part of how I see myself today". In addition to a number of traditional 5k's and 10k's, he mentioned his five marathons, including his first at Sugarloaf and two trips to Boston, and an ultra-marathon around the dormant volcano Mt St Helens in Washington to highlight his list of accomplishments.

"Over the last several years though, I've been looking for something different to keep that spark alive." Three years ago, a bucket-list item was officially crossed off as Long participated in his first triathlon. "When I first started training for Pumpkinman, going to the pool or over to Echo Lake to get some time in the water was...not great. I made every excuse not to go swimming. It's too windy, too cold, I had to share a lane, I almost drowned last time, and on and on. I simply didn't like swimming and I was terrible at it." Eventually though, Long found his motivation and consistency improved along with his enjoyment of the activity. "My frugality knowing I'd already paid for the triathlon was a stark reminder that I had to get in the water," Long said with a laugh. "A good natured shaming from my wife was helpful too."

With his history in running combined with a new skill in swimming, the SwimRun seemed like a natural next step. “A friend of mine sent me a link a few years ago to a SwimRun event in Casco Bay. It took about 10 seconds before I added it to my bucket list.” In addition to his duties as the director of MDNS, Long stays busy as a coach for the cross country, indoor and outdoor track teams at MDI High School. “Available racing opportunities for me personally are pretty limited, but this SwimRun concept has never left my mind. With everything that has gone on this year, this seemed like a prime opportunity to do something special and unique. I’m really excited about this, and the chance to do it and possibly raise money for my school is one I couldn’t pass up.”

His route will begin at the school, and will take him on a giant loop that includes landings at Bear Island, Sutton Island, Islesford on Little Cranberry Island, and Great Cranberry Island before momentarily returning to MDI. A relatively short run to the dock in Manset will set the stage for a swim to Greening Island near Southwest Harbor. A run along the center of Greening and one final swim into Gilpatrick Cove in Northeast Harbor brings him back nearly to where he started. In order to fully close the loop course, Long will take one last run and finish on the steps of the school where he started. Long said that starting and ending at the school were essential considerations when developing his route. “Early education is critical in developing a foundation for children, and that education starts right here with the work we do everyday. It’s a bit serendipitous that the location of the school works as well as it does for an attempt like this.”

Ultimately choosing a route went through several revisions and edits. “Once I decided this is something I was going to do, and had a purpose behind it, I took to finding a route. There are a lot of logistics and variables that go into something like this, so my recycle bin is full of scribbled on paper” Long said. To his knowledge, this is something that has never been done before. “Yeah, that’s a cool piece to it, but it’s not something that I ever sat down with the intent of trying to accomplish. The goal has always been to raise money for my school. Hopefully on “go” day, I’ll have brought some positive attention to the school and the work we do here.”

An official date for the attempt has not been finalized. “Right now, I’m targeting Sunday October 4th starting at 10am. The tides look to be the most ideal for my timing and duration of the route, but day-of weather will have a say on when I’m able to actually do it. As we get closer to the 4th, I’m hoping to have a firm start date and time a few days out.”

To donate to MDNS, go to www.mountdesertnurseryschool.com and click on the “donate” button.

Mailed in donations, payable to MDNS, can be sent to:

Mount Desert Nursery School
P.O. Box 24
Northeast Harbor, Maine 04662