

Beauty. Joy. Gratitude.

DR. JULIA FIORENTINO COMPETES IN THE 2019 TAHOE 200 ENDURANCE RUN

I DON'T LIKE AND CERTAINLY DON'T SHARE MANY PICTURES OF ME. BUT THIS...
SO MUCH BEAUTY. SO MUCH JOY. SO MUCH GRATITUDE.
AND YET I STILL DON'T HAVE ALL THE RIGHT WORDS TO TELL THE STORY.

I worked incredibly hard for the privilege of toeing that line in Homewood and the opportunity to traverse 205.5 miles around Lake Tahoe and through those spectacular mountains. I did everything differently in my training...I had huge mileage weeks, I power hiked long and slow with my pack and poles, I climbed here and in Colorado, I swam, I used the sauna, I changed my nutrition and sleep habits, I strengthened my mind. And yet I was still terrified as I stood at that start with real

mountain runners by my side and looked up apprehensively at that very first climb. I couldn't think about the big picture. I couldn't think about that first night coming up where I'd be alone. I couldn't think about how far away, in miles or hours or days or nights, that finish line actually was. I kept the race broken down in my head, aid station to aid station, just one mile at a time. And somehow, amazingly, with each mile, I gained strength and confidence as I realized that my training had indeed worked and that my legs, as well as my heart and soul and head were all going to get me around that lake and to the finish.



Dr. Fiorentino traverses the trails around Lake Tahoe in the 2019 Tahoe 200 Endurance Run.

Photo Credit – Hilary Ann Matheson

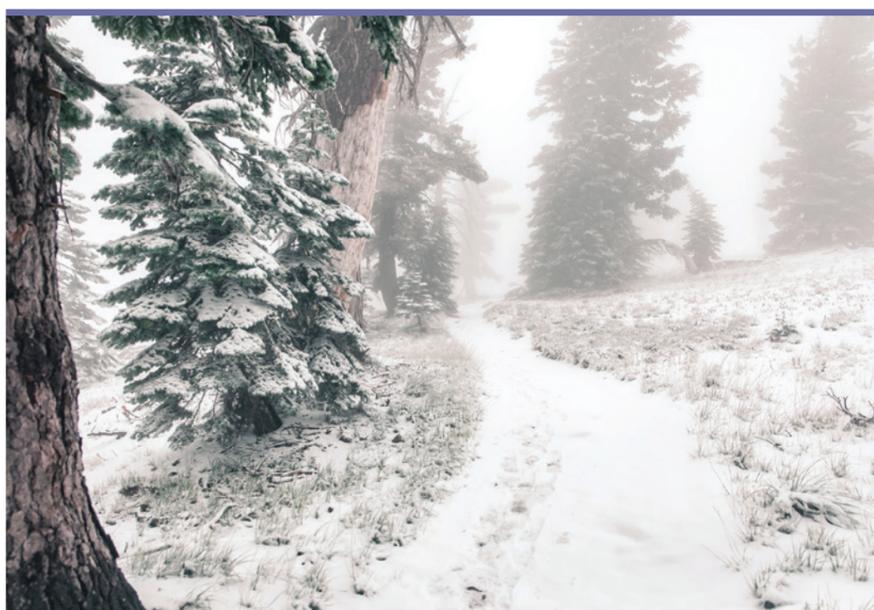
Of course, it was the hardest thing I have ever done...the most climbing (over 30,000 feet in 171 miles), the most technical trails, navigation, conquering my fear of being out there alone in the dark, the sleep deprivation, the Rubicon Trail, the Powerline. My breathing scared me when my lungs filled with dust on those crazy Jeep playgrounds, but with time, they seemed to learn how to function despite it. I was exhausted and depleted at mile 88 and considered chalking up the whole thing as a beautiful experience, but

thought "Let's decide after I rest" – and somehow, a little power nap miraculously fixed everything. There were some wild hallucinations during that third night. I can only imagine what the fourth night may have brought. But I was in awe as I realized what an hour of sleep could do and as I watched my body continually adapt to the challenges. Conquering each really difficult piece seemingly and repeatedly fueled me and strengthened me for the next.

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And then there were my people fueling me. My family traveled thousands of miles to share in this crazy adventure and, I think, finally understands why I do what I do. Coming into an aid station where they were waiting for me instantly healed every weary fiber in my being. I had assembled this dream team of crew and pacers who came together as strangers and left as family, all invested in the same goal. They did their jobs selflessly and perfectly, allowing me to not have to think, to just be, to simply move through the mountains.

When that blizzard hit and we realized how inadequate our gear was and how quickly we were deteriorating in the freezing cold, wet and windy mess, we made the best decision we could in the moment...to respect the weather and go back five miles rather than try to



An unexpected blizzard causes Dr. Julia Fiorentino to change course.

Photo Credit – Hilary Ann Matheson

forge ahead 15. I was amazed and so very grateful for what we had accomplished. But I was also embarrassed to have made a rookie mistake like that, to disappoint everyone there who had committed everything to helping me get to that finish and everyone back home who had been so supportive of the journey. I was devastated that everything could change in an instant and that I was not going to bring home that beautiful buckle, that tangible reminder of the accomplishment, of who I had become out there. I was angry that the doubters were right.

Now a week and a half has passed. I've slept a lot, but not well, I've cried a little and I've relived every mile over and over in my head, obsessing over what we did right and what we did wrong. And I'm even more amazed and grateful, while at the same time even more disappointed. I left pieces of my heart and soul out there in a wilderness where I truly felt complete and capable and strong and in control. Until I wasn't. Where I belonged. Until I didn't. Where I went to prove to myself and to my boys and to my friends and family and patients and maybe even a few strangers that a normal girl, a 50-year-old nobody from the flatlands, can dream big and do really hard things in the mountains. Until she can't.

But even then, it's okay. It's okay to try hard things that don't make sense simply because they fill your heart with joy, because they quiet your mind and bring your soul calm and contentment. It's okay to fail because you tried a really hard thing, gave it your all and learned and grew from the experience. You won't let that failure stop you from getting back up and getting back out there again.



Dr. Julia Fiorentino

We have one life and we owe it to ourselves and to the people we don't even know are watching to live it fully and bravely, to embrace the beauty as well as the pain, to find where we belong, to dare to do the really hard things.

171 miles is soooooo incredible but also soooooo not done. It changed me but there was even more to come. And I certainly didn't get to see all the beauty out there. This story is far from over because I still have a race to finish.

**Hold fast
to your dreams,
friends**

XOXO

Cover Photo Credit:
Scott Rokis