

Chadwicks native heads to Antarctica

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CHADWICKS — As Central New Yorkers are soaking up every last ray of summer sun, Michele (Rose) Cross is preparing for the coldest winter of her life – in Antarctica.

Cross, who graduated from Chadwicks High School in 1982, was selected for PolarTREC – Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating in the Arctic and Antarctic – and will spend six to seven weeks as part of a research team on Antarctica's McMurdo Station.

A special education teacher in Corning, Cross will be working with Stacy Kim and Bob Zook from the Moss Landing Marine Laboratory in Northern California.

The team will use a remotely operated vehicle to explore the ice shelf and the ocean floor. The device, called a Submersible Capable of under Ice Navigation and Imaging or SCINI (pronounced "skinny"), allows researchers access to extreme habitats that are inaccessible to divers and larger submersibles.

Her responsibilities will include documenting the research for the folks back home via her blog posting photos and responding to comments and questions on a Web forum.

Cross said she hopes to be able to show her students and other teachers "the importance of a place like Antarctica ... We must be better stewards or more responsible with this Earth."

She will also have on-ice responsibilities, which will include hand-drilling holes in the ice, tending to divers and hooking the SCINI up. She will even have the opportunity to "fly" the SCINI, she said.

With less than two months before she leaves to her trip, Cross is beginning to count the days.

"There are those moments where I'm like, 'I'm going to Antarctica. I'm going to Antarctica.' And I'm giddy laughing," Cross said. "Sometimes the hairs on my arms just stand up when I think about it."

Her voice begins to crack as she describes the wide range of emotions she has been feeling since being chosen for the program last March.

She said she feels "a huge responsibility to PolarTREC," and the "enormity" of the honor of being chosen for the trip.

"It's such a humbling experience to be chosen, and I go through those emotions," Cross said.

Cross first found out about PolarTREC while researching a mini-unit for her introduction to science class. She learned the program was accepting applications, but deleted her initial e-mail. A fellow teacher encouraged her to go through with her application, saying otherwise she would always wonder what could have been.

"I don't think there's anything really more painful than regret," Cross said.

So, Cross applied, hoping she would be chosen – but "I truly didn't think I had a snowball's chance."

What about the cold?

While she did mention surviving cold Central New York winters – perhaps as proof she'll do well in Antarctic environment – Cross questions if there is anything you can "really do to prepare yourself for that environment."

Cross said the closest Central New Yorkers come to Antarctic temperatures is standing in a commercial freezer, which are kept at -15 to -20 degrees Fahrenheit.

She even constructed her own Antarctic simulation chamber in the school cafeteria freezer – writing her blog between rows of frozen turkeys.

She also has been researching Antarctica – talking with people who have been there, reading books and watching documentaries.

"At least I don't feel like I'm going into it blind," she said.

Cross flew to California for a pre-deployment orientation to meet the research team and become acquainted with the equipment.

Cross also had to get her first Passport; in fact, she said, the traveling may be what she is most worried about. She also had to prepare her classroom and students for her absence.

Cross said she'll encourage her students to take advantage of the online tools to track her adventure.

"It will be interesting to see what they have to say," she said.

'Dream big'

Upon returning in the spring, Cross plans to use her experiences on the ice in the classroom.

"I will have such a unique experience that just a handful of other teachers have had that I really hope I can be a resource," Cross said. "I am hoping that I can help other teachers. I am hoping that I can show them how they can incorporate that into their classroom and their curriculum."

Most of all, Cross hopes she inspires people to "dream big."

"Number one, I think special education students; I think they reach a point in their high school career where, I think, they begin to stop dreaming," Cross said. "They don't believe that they can accomplish or dream or hope."

And, Cross said, she hopes her example extends beyond her classroom, and "sparks people across all ages to really dream."

Follow Cross' blog

To learn more about the PolarTREC project, visit their Web site at www.polartrec.com.

Folks can follow Michele Cross while she participates in a research project on the McMurdo Station by reading her blog at <http://www.polartrec.com/antarctic-undersea-rov-09/journals/michele-cross>.

More information about the SCINI project is available at the Project SCINI tab on the PolarTrec site www.polartrec.com/antarctic-undersea-rov-09 or at Moss Landing Marine Laboratory's Project SCINI Web site, scini2009.miml.calstate.edu (which is written at a higher reading level).

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