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[Business](#)
[Calendar](#)
[Community](#)
[Snapshot](#)
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[Front Page](#)
[Health & Medicine](#)
[Legals](#)
[Flagstaff](#)
[Police Log](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Your View \(Letters\)](#)
[Outdoors](#)
[Religion](#)
[Science](#)
[Sports](#)
[Strange](#)
[U.S.](#)
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[February](#)
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[Snapshot](#)

FALA science teacher assisting researchers in Antarctica

By now, Flagstaff resident Mindy Bell should be well settled into her quarters at frigid McMurdo Station, the hub of American scientific activity on the coldest, driest, windiest and southernmost continent on Earth - Antarctica.
Sunday, October 07, 2007

Timed with International Polar Year (2007 through 2009, for a full-season cycle), she is one of 15 teachers nationwide, selected out of 150 applicants this year, to be paired with researchers conducting cutting-edge polar research in Antarctica and the Arctic.

"I try to do as many teacher-things I can," said Bell, a secondary-science teacher at Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy. "I applied for it, and I got it. It's a large scientific program to invigorate polar science."

A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Bell, 49, has been a teacher for 24 years, including six years at FALA.

The program she has joined is PolarTREC, an educational research experience funded by the National Science Foundation, through the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States (ARCUS).

PolarTREC is planning eight Arctic and four Antarctic field expeditions a year for the two-year IPY, she said.

Bell spent the last week in September carefully packing about 40 pounds of sweaters, jeans, long underwear, history books on Antarctica and other essential items for her stay on the 5.4-million-square-mile continent.

She left Flagstaff at 1:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 30, for a 17-hour flight, which took her through Phoenix, Los Angeles and New Zealand (Christchurch and Auckland) to McMurdo. Bell was given more than 30 pounds of heavy outerwear in New Zealand.

Her absence for seven weeks might prove daunting for her family.

"It's pretty big when you leave your family for seven weeks," she said.

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Bell's husband, Darrell Kaufman, 47, a geology and environmental science professor at NAU, will stay behind with their daughter Lindsey, 15.

"We'll miss her a lot, but she's been looking forward to this," he said. "I think her students are going to appreciate her being in Antarctica at the cutting edge of research there."

INVOLVING CLASSROOMS

An essential component of the expedition is improving science education.

"A lot of this will be geared toward teachers, because I'm hoping they'll follow me with their classes," she said.

In Los Angeles, Bell met members of her research team, led by Stacy Kim, principal investigator and professor at Moss Landing Marine Laboratory in California.

Each day, Bell will help deploy an ROV (remotely operated vehicle) to study unusual invertebrates that live on the sea floor, but she will not be entering the water.

Equipped with thrusters, lights and cameras, the ROV fits through six-inch holes drilled through the ice and descends below SCUBA-diving depth.

"It goes down through the ice and rotates," Bell said. "They'll be imaging the sea floor. It's tethered on a long cord. Let's hope it works."

FALA students will be part of an underwater experiment where their pictures are placed on a PVC frame and taken to the seafloor. The pictures will be imaged from several distances and lighting levels to determine optimal image quality.

Reporter Betsey Bruner can be reached at 556-2255 or by e-mail at bbruner@azdailysun.com.

Follow the adventure

Track Mindy Bell's scientific adventures (and those of other PolarTREC teachers) through the PolarTREC Web site: www.polar trec.com.

Expeditions are listed chronologically. Look for "Antarctic Undersea ROV," to access her journal, and the "Ask the Team" section to interact with the researchers.

Individuals and classes can also watch PowerPoint presentations and talk to Mindy and the team by phone from Antarctica.

To find out more about the research of the team led by Stacy Kim, visit scini.mlml.calstate.edu.

Bell is welcoming all communications while she is in Antarctica.

"Remember: These are your tax dollars that are sending me there; you should get your money's worth," she said.

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