

Pink Palace Educator on Antarctic Expedition

By Aisling Maki

When she's not busy tagging and tracking seals with a team of scientists in Antarctica, Memphis educator Alex Eilers is responding to email questions and sending postcards to her students and community supporters, who are following her journey online.

Eilers, the education manager for The Pink Palace Museum, is one of a handful of kindergarten to 12th-grade teachers nationwide selected to spend several weeks on a working scientific expedition at McMurdo Station in Antarctica.

She's tagging and tracking the mating and migration patterns of Weddell seals, the world's southernmost mammal.

Eilers calls the expedition "a truly an amazing experience."

It takes roughly two hours to complete all the procedures, which include weighing; measuring; taking samples of whiskers, fur and blood; and outfitting each seal with a tiny camera.

"We are getting really close with the seals as we do our research," Eilers said during a phone call from Antarctica Wednesday, Jan. 1. "We've taken lots and lots of pictures. There's one of me with a seal's head in my lap."

The expedition is organized by PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating), an initiative managed by the Arctic Research Consortium, an organization dedicated to providing leadership in advancing knowledge and understanding of the Arctic.

[Kate Dixon](#), School and Teacher Services manager for The Pink Palace Museum, said the PolarTREC expedition is one of Eilers' many educational adventures.

"She's really very interested in these programs that take teachers out of their everyday environment and send them to amazing places," Dixon said. "She's been back and forth to

Washington several times, and several years ago she was a teacher at sea off the coast of San Diego (for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Teacher at Sea Program), and her particular focus was leatherback sea turtles.”

Eilers, who started her career at the Pink Palace in 1995 as a planetarium educator, has also served for the past decade in the MESSENGER Educator Fellowship Program, focused on the public outreach and education of a NASA mission involving a space probe orbiting Mercury.

As an educator at the Pink Palace – the namesake of the Memphis Pink Palace Family of Museums – Eilers has a wide reach, educating thousands of children throughout the tri-state region through field trips and outreach programs at schools.

Prior to her departure to Antarctica, Eilers visited numerous local schools to spread the word about her expedition, bringing with her samples of the extreme weather gear she’s required to wear and some of the equipment she’s using to tag and track the seals.

“She always tries to go out and get classrooms involved before she goes so they can discuss it and try to follow her journey while she’s gone,” said Pink Palace marketing manager [Ronda Cloud](#).

The Pink Palace’s education department has also put together an exhibit to highlight Eilers’ research and engage local students in her journey.

“She’s a very enthusiastic teacher,” Dixon said. “She’s committed to museum education, informal education and hands-on teaching. There will be so many students in the Memphis area who’ll be introduced to this part of the world that’s so far away through their connection with her because she’s been in their classrooms and they’ve been following her (online) journals.”

As part of the PolarTREC program, teachers and researchers harness the power of the Internet to share their experiences with students, members of the public and other education and science professionals.

Children are invited to read Eilers’ frequent journal entries, leave comments and ask questions that Eilers can relay to the team’s scientists.

“Hopefully through the communication she does online with students, they’re going to become increasingly interested in the environment, these particular animals and the issue of global warming,” Dixon said.

Eilers sent postcards from Antarctica to Mid-South students, teachers and other members of the community to engage them in her journey. A section of her online journal allows recipients to check in and leave a note to say they’ve received their postcard.

“Not very many of us are going to get to Antarctica, and that was the idea behind it,” Cloud said. “She wanted to mail postcards to classrooms postmarked from McMurdo Station in Antarctica.”

When Eilers returns from her expedition in late February, she’ll create instructional activities to transfer scientific data, methodologies and technology to local and regional classrooms.

Visit www.polartrec.com/expeditions/weddell-seals-in-the-ross-sea to follow Eilers’ Antarctic journey.