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Fortunately, She Thinks Ice Is Nice

D.C. Science Teacher Is Studying Glaciers for Six Weeks on an Arctic Exploration Team

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Doing scientific experiments all day and most of the night on a Coast Guard vessel in below-zero Arctic temperatures sounds like a fantastic time to Simone Welch.

That's a good thing, because that's just what this science teacher from the District's Oyster-Adams Bilingual School is doing. For about six weeks!

Welch, 32, won the opportunity to join a team of about 40 scientists as they research glaciers and other things in the Bering Sea, near the North Pole.

"I told my kids to give me letters to Santa and I'll drop them off early," she joked.

She was one of 12 teachers chosen in the United States, and the only in the Washington area, to participate in the program, called PolarTREC and funded by the National Science Foundation.

Since the beginning of this month, Welch has been living in conditions that certainly are not luxurious.

Aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Healy, she shares a small sleeping space with two other scientists.

The meals, she said, are "geared to 18-year-old boys," but there is a salad bar!

In the past, Welch has been seasick, but she does not expect that to happen this time because the ship is so sturdy, she might not even feel as if she is at sea.

When she is on deck she wears a Mustang Survival suit, which is orange and "puffs out" so that if she were to fall overboard, she would float. Steel-toed rubber boots complete the deck outfit.

For the almost daily trips onto the glacial ice, she and the others will wear white suits and boots to blend in with the snow so they don't startle the animals.

Welch can wear regular clothes, though, when she is helping the scientists in the laboratories, which is what she will be doing most of the time and which most excites her.

At Oyster, Welch's science room houses tanks with about 15 animals, including a ball python, a salamander, an African pygmy hedgehog, a leopard gecko and hissing cockroaches.

Welch has engaged all of her pre-K-through-fifth grade students in the project, teaching them about icebergs, glaciers and Arctic ecology through a series of inventive experiments.

One of the most fun experiments, said 9-year-old Emilia Majersik, involved mashing marshmallows together to show that pressure, like heat, can melt things.

"She gets the kids so excited about it," said Emilia, a third-grader.

To keep connected, Welch is writing a Web log and will be able to take questions from kids and answer them while she is away.

Everybody can follow along and send in questions by going to <http://www.polartrec.com/user/181>.

She is already posting information about her trip!

Fifth-grader David Fadul, 10, said Welch is great at "explaining stuff."

Would he like to do what his teacher is doing?

"I mean if it's really, really cold and there's a chance of sinking in ice, that lowers my interest, but I might want to go!" he said.

-- Valerie Strauss

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