

In the Spotlight: Going exploring

by Justin Lafferty / Our Town staff

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Glenn Moore/Our Town

Though he's officially a teacher, Mark McKay will probably never stop being a student.

The Tracy resident and science teacher at Stockton's Venture Academy has dedicated his life to learning. So much so that he's braving below-freezing temperatures right now, studying summer ice-free conditions on the Bering Sea off the Western coast of Alaska.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," McKay said. "I was really excited (when I found out) and a little bit scared, mostly being away from my family. I couldn't believe it."

McKay was one of a few teachers chosen to participate in PolarTREC, an educational research experience. He arrived in Alaska last week to spend a month on a boat with researcher Ray Sambrotto from Columbia University, discovering what happens as ice retreats. McKay documents his experiences through blogs and podcasts on PolarTREC's Web site.

McKay and Sambrotto will be aboard the R/V Knorr, which PolarTREC said was the ship that discovered the wreckage of the Titanic in 1985.

"He is always wanting to learn more, better himself, try new things," said Christina Fugazi, a fellow science teacher at Venture Academy. "He has an insatiable appetite for learning. He's dedicated to education, not only for his students, but for himself. He's always pushing the envelope."

This will be yet another chance to learn for McKay, who is working toward his second master's degree through an online program at the University of Nebraska and wants to earn a doctorate soon.

He said he hates being bored — learning gives him the opportunity to constantly exercise his mind.

McKay has been interested in the ocean since he got a saltwater fish tank in junior high. Since then, he has devoted his academic life to getting wet. McKay also enjoys breeding tropical fish and scuba diving.

This trip also gives McKay the chance to get out of the classroom. He's not the kind of teacher who will drone on about acids and bases and have students answer questions from the textbook as homework.

McKay, who used to teach at Clover Middle School in Tracy, wants books to supplement to real learning. He loves taking students outside and getting their hands dirty. Whenever he and the school can afford it, McKay takes a small group of students to the beach to study oceanic ecosystems.

“Somebody asked me what's the best way to get science into the classroom. I said, ‘Get the kids out of the classroom,’” he explained. “Science is a verb. You've got to go out, and you've got to do it.”

• *In the Spotlight* is a weekly profile in *Our Town*. To nominate someone to be *In the Spotlight* or to comment on this week's story, contact *Our Town* Editor Justin Lafferty at 830-4269 or jlafferty@tracypress.com.

Meet Mark McKay

Age: 50

How long in Tracy: 17 years

Born: Burbank

Education: Bachelor's degree, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo; master's degree, National University in Stockton

Work: Science teacher, Venture Academy in Stockton

Family: Wife, Judith; son, Ian, 21

Follow his journey: www.polartrec.com/user/185

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