Rawlins Daily Times
Serving All of Carbon County

Science teacher come polar researcher shares science with elementary students

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Published: Saturday, February 26, 2011 2:06 AM MST

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(Rawlins Daily Times, Kathy Johnson) Joseph Horn goes "ice fishing" in an igloo made of plastic milk jugs at Sinclair Elementary School on Friday.

They'd gone native and caught fish for survival in a milk jug igloo.

They'd waddled frantically away from sea lions on stubby penguin legs.

And perhaps most importantly, they had fresh snow cones.

Friday afternoon at Sinclair Elementary School, the entire student body had just run the gauntlet of the Parent Teacher Organization's yearly party — this year's theme: the Arctic and Antarctica.

They had the facts, firsthand, and now they were ready to interview Lesley Urasky about Antarctica's Beardmore Glacier.

Q: "How long is it?"

A: "Almost 200 miles."

Q: "That's ice?"

A: "Yes, and it's a lot of ice. This glacier is about 3 miles thick."

Q: "Down?"

A: "Down. So figure going halfway from here to Rawlins. That's how thick that ice is going down."

And that was just the presentation's first slide.

Urasky is a Rawlins High School science teacher come polar researcher. She returned to her home in Sinclair Jan. 19 after more than 40 days studying glacial retreat with Polar TREC — Polar Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating, a National Science Foundation-funded initiative pairing teachers and researchers.

Part of Urasky's contribution stateside is spreading polar science to teachers and students of all ages.

She's already noticed a difference in some of her high school classes.

"I've seen some of my students who are maybe turned off to education really open up. I think they see the relevance, that they can have opportunities like this if they continue getting an education," Urasky said. "Maybe it's the extremeness or remoteness of it. It just seems very exotic and is a place most people don't ever go."

The most interested students ask questions about the science behind the exploration, she said, they ask about polysyllabic things like cosmogenic nuclide measurement.

But for elementary school students, it's all about big machines and penguins.

Especially penguins.

"Oh, Happy Feet," sang a chorus of Sinclair students after the first of several animal-themed slides popped up.

"Does anyone know what kind of penguin that is?" Urasky asked.

"A white belly penguin?" answered one student hesitantly.

"Close. Anyone else?"

"Um, Emperor penguin," offered another.

"That's right. Have any of you seen March of the Penguins?" Urasky asked.

A few respond, although murmurs of Happy Feet rippled through the crowd.

"OK, Happy Feet," she offered.

"Happy Feet," came the reply.

Although she hadn't intended on an intensive Q-and-A on every slide, Urasky said a big part of presenting science to younger children is getting them excited.

"I hope they realize that the world is at their feet, that if you dream it, you can do it," Urasky said. "It doesn't have to be in the name of science, it's that curiosity to go out there and find things out."

She'd like to do more hands-on activities in the future, a thought driven home as she watched multiple students wrap themselves in her polar jacket, "Big Red," open and close the air valve on specialty " bunny boots," and don heavy mittens up to their armpits.

"If you can capture that enthusiasm and hold onto it, it'll grow as they progress through school," Urasky said, adding, "The more we can get kids out to see the world, the better our understanding is going to be of other people and ourselves."

Now that she's readjusted to Wyoming's climate — and yes, she said, it was colder here in Carbon County than Antarctica in January — Urasky is already planning her next adventure.

"I'm applying to dig dinosaurs in Montana this summer," she said with a laugh. "It could be a nesting site. That's exciting."

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