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February 3, 2016



Researching Greatness: How Dieuwertje Kast found and pursued her passion in STEM Education



Dieuwertje Jasmijn (DJ) Kast seems like the teacher we all wanted to have in high school. She's motivated, passionate, and cares most about spreading those things to others, about helping them discover what moves them. For Kast, research in marine biology is deeply intertwined with being an educator, with as much of the joys and importance of her work being about understanding as they are about communicating to others. She's even made science dresses a part of her daily uniform, to remind herself and others how exciting and fun science can be.

"I love being the STEM translator for researchers," she told us in an interview. "I love seeing what current researchers are working on so that I can bring that into my k-12 classrooms as lessons and inspirations. I think it is vital to be able to understand your work well enough that it can be explained to a non science person." There's something so refreshing about a dedication to research founded

to a non-science person. There's something so refreshing about a dedication to research fueled in the urge to share it with the next generation who will keep it moving forward.

Kast is especially interested in reaching young people of color and students from low income backgrounds who don't often get the impression from the establishment that their success is encouraged. On top of research and teaching (and being in the recent Forbes 30 Under 30 list), she's been involved in so many important projects on this front: the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative, the USC Wonderkids program, the USC young scientists program, and Linda Chilton's CDEBI funded summer science camps, to name a few. Her motivation, in part, stems from personal experience. Aside from some advisors and professors who she credits with helping her get to where she is today, she points out that "beyond them most of my professors in my undergraduate and graduate program were predominately white and predominantly male...I've done a few surveys of elementary school students about what they think a scientist should look like and many times it ends up being a white male in a white lab coat." That didn't stop her, and she's making sure kids from all backgrounds and walks of life should know it shouldn't stop them, either.

Kast's love of marine biology--the Arctic is her next frontier for a joint research and teaching endeavor called PolarTREC--and STEM education in general, all seem to come from a sincere joy in what she does that floods (nautical pun intended) outwards, almost inevitably. But she's also the first to admit that this drive has been bolstered by impactful experiential learning through research, and inspiring mentorship. She has a few words of advice to share to students everywhere, and is living proof that you can also practice what you preach, and that those mentors are out there in people like herself:

"Be your authentic self and follow your passions. Get experience in what you love there are lots of ways to combine multiple loves, especially in science. Try to get experiences in all sorts of fields...Find [mentors] who are doing what you like reach out."



By Kalman Victor

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