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Boynton Beach teacher bundling up to join research in Arctic

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BOYNTON BEACH

By the fifth layer of jackets, eighth-grader Sebastien Cobos could hardly move.

His science teacher at St. Mark Catholic School, Elizabeth Eubanks, was showing the class the gear she will wear to keep warm in the Arctic, where she will live from June 10 to July 12 as part of a research project on climate change.

She handed Cobos her sweatpants, then a second layer of pants, then a neck warmer, liner socks, five jackets, three hats and two pairs of gloves, which he put on with increasing bulky difficulty.

Her Florida-raised students, unaccustomed to cold-weather layering techniques, were incredulous.

"Are you making all this up?" student Andrew Dziminowicz asked. "Are you really serious?"

St. Mark students began learning about what to them is an alternative universe, the Arctic, over the past few months and will continue studying the poles when school resumes in August. Over the summer, they can expand their knowledge of the frozen tundra as Eubanks and two researchers from Florida International University investigate the role of global warming on Arctic ecosystems and record their experiences at www.polartrec.com.

Eubanks is one of 36 teachers to study the Arctic and Antarctica from 2007 to 2009 as part of a grant offered to PolarTREC, an educational research organization funded by the National Science Foundation. The grant allows teachers to do research with scientists so they can bring back the information to their schools and communities. Eubanks beat out 250 applicants to become one of 12 teachers to be sent to the poles this year.

Eubanks' team will be based in Barrow, Alaska, the northernmost settlement of mainland North America. The average June high temperature there is 39 degrees, balmy compared with the average February low temperature of -22 degrees. But Eubanks said her biggest fear is not the temperature; it's the 24-hour summer sunlight. The sun does not set at high latitudes in summer because of the tilt of the Earth's axis in those months.

"That's really going to whack me out," she said.

Eubanks, 44, is known at her school as a high-energy teacher who emphasizes learning by experience. She gathers St. Mark families each year to clean local beaches and raised \$5,000 for her native New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. She also runs in marathons, supervises several school clubs, teaches yoga and is a volunteer for Sunfest and the Lake Worth Street Painting Festival.

In April, she won the William T. Dwyer Award for Excellence in Education, an annual honor given to [Palm Beach County](#)'s best teachers. She was the first teacher to win from a private school.

"Without her enthusiasm, global warming and pollution would have been minimally incorporated into our science program," St. Mark Principal Joseph Finley said. "Now we can generate more interest in science and go much more in depth."

The Arctic will not be Eubanks' first science learning trip. She spent two weeks last summer studying Pacific sharks on a voyage sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Teacher at Sea program.

PolarTREC looks for teachers with such enthusiasm for science and adventure, said PolarTREC project manager Janet Warburton.

Eubanks and other teachers will use online journals and photos to record what they learn and are expected to teach two lessons on their experiences within 60 days of their return, Warburton said. An independent evaluator tested students' knowledge of the poles this year and will test it again next year after she teaches lessons from her experience.

Eubanks will stay at the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium, where she will live in military-style housing, Warburton said. The site has Internet access and cafeteria-style meals, she said.

"It's always exciting for someone from Florida to come to the Arctic," Warburton said from Fairbanks, Alaska. "The research she participates in will have an impact on Florida and an impact on everyone. It's a life-changing experience that will affect her personally and professionally."

Eubanks said, "My anticipation is really high to learn about things I can't foresee or imagine yet."

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