

Teacher Spotlight: Cara Pekarcik, 2018 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year

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For Immediate Release

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(<http://mits.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/In-classroom.jpg>)

photo courtesy of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

The Museum Institute for Teaching Science (MITS) would like to congratulate our 2016 Summer Professional Development Institute alumnus and North Quincy High School biology teacher, Cara Pekarcik, on her recent receipt of the 2018 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=24344>) award! Cara was recognized by the Massachusetts Department of Education for her excellence in teaching and her dedication, commitment and positive contributions to her classroom. When asked how she felt about winning the award, Cara said, “[I was] shocked to win an award for something I do everyday.”

Cara started her career in animal behavior, research and informal education. Eleven years ago, while working on a whale watch, the public’s positive response to her enthusiasm for teaching about the natural history of whales led Cara to consider a career change. Inspired by exceptional educators (including her junior high physical education teacher, Mrs. Iwaniec and her college anatomy and physiology professor, Dr. Schutt, to name a few), Cara set her sights on the classroom.

The classroom has been a natural fit! Cara loves talking with youth about science, and is always striving to make content

(<http://mits.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/DSCN5556.jpg>) more accessible for her students. Her commitment to answer her students’ many questions has led Cara to further her understanding of a variety of topics. By participating in professional development programs, Cara has gained practical hands-on experience with inquiry-based science and research. She values these experiences as opportunities to gain comfort with new material, to collaborate with other educators, and to gather new resources or approaches for classroom implementation.

“Learning doesn’t stop after you graduate,” she said. Indeed, Cara is a lifelong learner.

Last summer, Cara participated in MITS’ North Shore Region Summer Professional Development Institute. During the institute, Cara added to her understanding of coastal ecosystems by investigating salt marshes on the North Shore. She surveyed a study area using transect lines, and she developed a lesson for her students on American eels. At her school, Cara hopes to integrate a salt marsh field trip into her Fall 2018 curriculum to help excite and encourage students to embrace their own learning.

Soon after her MITS experience, Cara boarded an icebreaker bound for Antarctica as part of PolarTREC, a program in which K-12 teachers spend several weeks participating



(<http://mits.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ECW-gear.jpg>)

photo courtesy of Cara Pekarcik

in hands-on field research experiences in order to invigorate polar science education and understanding. While in Antarctica, Cara shared her experience researching diatoms via PolarConnect (<https://www.polar-trec.com/polar-connect>) live video chats and daily journals, and she encouraged her students back in her Quincy classroom to ask questions via the live chats. Cara’s Antarctic adventure lesson plans are available for download by educators who might wish to engage their own students in polar region research (<https://www.polar-trec.com/resources/event/polarconnect-event-cara-pekarcik-the-southern-ocean-diatom-research-team>) (<https://www.polar-trec.com/resources/event/polarconnect-event-cara-pekarcik-the-southern-ocean-diatom-research-team>)).

As 2018 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, Cara represents excellence in education, and she is quick to acknowledge that many people along the way have helped her succeed. She hopes that her enthusiasm and love of learning make her a role model for her students.

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The Museum Institute for Teaching Science specializes in providing hands-on, minds-on, inquiry-based STEM professional development for formal and informal educators. For more information, visit www.mits.org or call 617-328-1515.

What Teachers Are Saying

Today made me feel excited about teaching again. My curiosity was sparked and a sense of flexibility and adventure was there to help me learn so much.

I am exploring science in an entirely different way than the manner in which I was taught.

This class has certainly opened my eyes. I'm looking forward to really opening the eyes of my students and encouraging them to be curious, observe, and know that they can find the answers and be lifelong learners...This is by far the best course I've ever taken. I learned so much and I feel so much more confident teaching science to my students. Excellent!

From a teacher's perspective, the opportunity for open inquiry was priceless. It inspired wonder, curiosity and increased the students' investment in learning.

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Brochures

- MITS General Brochure (<http://birchwoodwebdesign.com/~mits/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Revised-MITS-General-Brochure-for-Website.pdf>)

Annual Reports

- 2015 Annual Report (<http://birchwoodwebdesign.com/~mits/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/FY15-Annual-Report-Web-Version.pdf>)
- 2014 Annual Report (<http://birchwoodwebdesign.com/~mits/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/MITS-FY14-Annual-Report-for-website.pdf>)
- 2013 Annual Report (<http://birchwoodwebdesign.com/~mits/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/MITS-FY13-Annual-Report-Web-Version.pdf>)
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BACK TO TOP

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