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Shaler Area teacher preparing for six weeks in Antarctica

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Mike Penn, a Shaler Area teacher, will help install and maintain weather stations in Antarctica.

Shaler Area Elementary School teacher Mike Penn will travel to Antarctica for participation in PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating), an educational research experience partnering middle and high school teachers with polar science researchers.

PolarTREC, managed by the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States, has chosen Penn as one of 11 U.S. teachers for program participation.

For six weeks starting in November, Penn will install and maintain approximately 20 remote automatic weather stations (AWS) throughout Antarctica while partnering with a University of Wisconsin-Madison research team, he said.

He will be based at both the McMurdo Station and Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station research centers. The South Pole Station is 850 nautical miles, or about 980 miles, south of McMurdo Station, states the National Science Foundation website. The independent federal agency funds PolarTREC.

"Generally, the helicopter will take us out and we will fly back. Or, we'll fly out in an airplane called a Twin Otter that has a little bit longer range," Penn, 53, of Economy, said.

The devices will record temperature, wind speed and direction, and barometric pressure. Penn said his team also will test equipment that measures falling snow, differentiating between new precipitation and the wind blowing old snow by calculating the sound of its impact. Scientists worldwide utilize AWS data.

Throughout his time in Antarctica, Penn will collaborate with Dr. Matthew A. Lazzara, associate scientist/meteorologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Antarctic Meteorological Research Center.

Lazzara wrote in an email that while PolarTREC has worked with the university, researchers have used the AWS to document the first climatology of the Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica's largest ice shelf. The weather stations enable this study as there are no other staffed stations there.

"I've gone to Madison, Wisconsin to meet with my team and how to get up to the stations and how to prepare for all of that," he said. "It's been a very rigorous process and then there are a few other things like the navigation process because when you're in the south pole, every direction is north, so there is some training there."

The applications process has taken Penn two years because he didn't make the cut during his first attempt.

"It's very, very thorough. My principal, (Ian Miller), Sean Aiken, the superintendent, and Brian O'Black, the assistant superintendent, all had to make sure that what I said was truthful and that they would be supportive of me because I am going to be gone six weeks, but they've been nothing but supportive."

"I was very open with my kids (his students) about, 'I failed. I gave it a shot. It didn't work. I'm going to try again, and to have a great mindset and to keep trying things that they want to do.'"

Penn is giving presentations to schools about his adventure before and after his trip.

"I think this collaboration is just wonderful. It gives the educators, and the great many students they interact with, a window in the world of science. Antarctic science, at that! It's the travel, the location and harsh conditions, but also how — just like science done anywhere else — we are striving to make observations, understand how the weather and climate work, and then communicate that to others," Lazzara said.

"I think it just makes it real and accessible to kids," Penn said. "There's a difference between reading it in a book or listening to somebody, and seeing somebody and seeing the pictures from somebody who actually went there and did it."

Follow Penn's preparations and expedition at: www.polartrec.com/expeditions/antarctic-automatic-weather-stations-2018 (<http://www.polartrec.com/expeditions/antarctic-automatic-weather-stations-2018>).

Erica Cebzanov is a Tribune-Review contributor.



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