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Florida teacher brings cleanup fun to Barrow

TAMAR BEN-YOSEF

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Elizabeth Eubanks is the kind of guest any home would love to have. She did the mundane chores no one else really wants to do and she cleaned after herself.

What's more, she even got the children to clean.

Eubanks is the second teacher from the Lower 48 to spend a month in Barrow as part of the PolarTREC program, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and run by the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States.

On July 9, days before her departure, Eubanks and Jae Jae Ningeok, program director of the Summer Youth Program, organized a Barrow beach cleanup with the help of 28 enthusiastic volunteers.

"I wanted to get to know the local kids, after all that's what I make a living doing," Eubanks said. And so posed the idea to Ningeok.

Ningeok was so excited about Eubanks' offer to have youths partake in the cleanup activity that she even brought both

her children along.

Back in Florida's Palm Beach County, Eubanks is a regular beach cleaner-upper. Her students skim the hot, sunny beaches with her just as the Barrow youths did.

But will they go the length of jumping into frigid, Arctic waters to snatch a drifting bag like Melissa Nicely did? Not likely.

"The kids were very enthusiastic about cleaning," Eubanks said. "They went to great lengths to get trash that was lodged under large metal structures."

All in all, the group collected 55 pounds of trash, buried under metal scraps, in between rocks or just lying on the beach.

And if that was not enough of a Kodak moment for the environmentally conscious teacher, the youths pulled out from the beach in their van chanting "Keep Alaska Beautiful, Keep America Beautiful and quyanaq."

Before leaving, the children stopped for a group photo wearing T-shirts, sent to them from Florida's Palm Beach cleanup group. They also got pens, hats and other useful items.

Prior to coming Barrow, Eubanks filled a jar with sand and shells from her home beaches. She used the jar to teach the students about the area she lives in and the importance of keeping the waters they eat from clean. A small rope was used to demonstrate how trash can put baby seals in danger.

Eubanks, born in New Orleans, spent much of her youth not unlike children in Barrow: crabbing, fishing, exploring the bayous and camping out west with her family, according to Eubanks' profile on the PolarTREC Web site.

Her main interest, other than teaching, is zoology.

Though Eubanks came to Barrow to help with a carbon research project lead by researchers Steve Oberbauer and Paulo Olivas of Florida International University, the birds were what she waited to see every day.

Eubanks stayed in Barrow for a month. During that time, she took daily trips out to the tundra and helped the team out by measuring light bouncing off from plants and tagging photos.

Her work this summer is a continuation of a research project that started last summer.

The team is investigating the role of carbon in Arctic tundra ecosystems.

Eubanks said she enjoyed her research tasks and enjoyed hiking a mile out to the tundra on the boardwalk, looking at birds and plants and simply being outside while learning a thing or two.

Once back home in Florida, Eubanks will pass on what she learned to her students. The school will dedicate the next school year to the International Polar Year and will have special activities that have everything to do with the North and South Pole.

Eubanks will also talk about her experience in Barrow to about 600 other teachers throughout the country.

Tamar Ben-Yosef can be reached at (907) 348-2419 or toll-free (800) 770-9830, ext. 419.

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