

# Edward Little High School teacher to spend 3 weeks studying Arctic Circle

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By Daryn Slover

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On the first day of Gavan Teehan's arctic climate class, his teacher asked him to write what he knew about the Arctic Circle.

"Ice, cold and animals," Teehan wrote.

"I was clueless," the Edward Little High School sophomore said. "The first day or two of class opened my eyes right up."

Learning about the Arctic Circle for eight months has given Teehan a whole new perspective.

"It's not all pretty and that," he said.

"No, it's not," his teacher, Erin Towns, said.

Towns left Maine on Saturday for a two-day flight to Ilulissat, a town in western Greenland.

More importantly, Ilulissat sits 220 miles north of the Arctic Circle, the focus of the class she teaches.

Towns is one of 11 teachers from across the nation selected to participate on a scientific expedition called PolarTREC. She will be away from her Auburn classroom for over three weeks learning what to teach Teehan and his classmates next.

“It is important to prep these guys for the economy and the politics of rising sea levels for when they do get out of high school,” she said.

The social studies teacher will live in a house with five others.

“Me and five scientists,” Towns said. “Two seismologists, a geophysicist, a glaciologist, a graduate student and one high school teacher — me.”

Towns said she already spent time with her housemates learning about crevasse safety in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

“They are awesome people,” who have fancier job titles than hers, she said. “They are down to earth, have a great sense of humor and love their families. They are normal people with exceptional jobs.”

Each morning in Greenland, Towns and her research team will fly from Ilulissat out to the Western Greenland Ice Sheet to study glacier dynamics. The helicopter will land on ice that is 1,000 meters thick, or 3,280 feet.

Towns’ Edward Little students will follow along the entire time through online journals, podcasts and PolarConnect real-time presentations from the field.

“I will Zoom into the classroom as much as I can,” she said.

“The primary goal of my experience is to communicate to my students what polar scientists are doing in the arctic,” Towns wrote on her online journal titled “Prepping Students for an Expedition: A Two Year Event.”

Towns’ trip was originally scheduled for the summer of 2020. COVID-19 canceled it and the pandemic postponed the 2021 expedition as well.

While Towns waited, she brought the arctic to the classroom. She taught how Maine lobstermen would need to diversify if rising sea levels were to affect lobster hauls. She took her students to the Portland Museum of Art, where they saw an exhibit that connected the coast of Maine to the arctic coast through artwork. Towns also took her students for walks around their school.

“We walked around the school and looked at divots and craters and she would tie it all into glaciers,” Teehan said about his teacher. “You want to come to this class and learn and not to just fall asleep.”

Towns compares the coast of Greenland with the coast of Maine. They both have picturesque villages perched along the ocean’s edge, but Towns wants to see more during her visit.

“Just like I do here in Maine, I want to focus on the mundane, the real life. I love to find the balance,” she said, and will explore the ins and outs of Greenland with her camera.

“I will use photography to bring the story to life,” she said.

Towns is well-known for her social media posts of compelling photographic details. She said photography is her primary way to communicate what she is thinking, feeling and what she is passionate about.

Western Greenland is the seventh country Towns has visited for teacher development programs since she began at ELHS 22 years ago.

She has studied in Japan, Ecuador, China, Ethiopia, Germany and Kazakhstan through fellowships, scholarships and awards.

“Each program builds on each other,” Towns said, with one adventure helping to lead to the next.

“This expedition is a result of all that work, people that I met, things I have tried in my classroom,” she said. “I did not know much about glacier dynamics before, and now I do.”

And so does Gavan Teehan.

“I can open up about glaciers now,” he said. “It’s not just about polar bears and penguins.”

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