

# The NATURE TEACHER



Science teacher Cristina Veresan was named teacher of the year last fall at Southport Middle School in Port St. Lucie.

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BY SUSAN BURGESS

**C**ristina Veresan's eyes sparkle when she talks about the experience that caused the rest of her life to fall into place.

Now she is a science teacher at Southport Middle School in Port St. Lucie. Then, she was an Emerson College (Boston) student doing a semester at sea on a tall ship — a 134-foot schooner based at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, crewed by students and teachers as they conducted research in the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda.

Besides doing original research, they deployed chemical and physical sampling devices and studied their finds in a wet and dry lab on the ship. They made up songs and skits to teach each other and, because they were also crew members, stood four-hour watches.

The combination of original research, having scientists and teachers on board to explain and guide and working as a team both to sail the ship and to conduct research, combined into an intense experience.

"It opened my eyes," she says. "I was pushed to my limit in terms of understanding life at sea. It was a great experience with great minds, but with a lot of fun and cooperation. That sort of personal growth experience is what I want my students to have. I want them to be inspired to seek those moments out for themselves."

Veresan fell in love with the outdoors when she was a child in upper Michigan. The love affair continued when she moved to Lebanon, N.H.

"I grew up around the Great Lakes and that was as grand a body of water as I could imagine as a small child," she says. "When I first saw the Atlantic Ocean I was spellbound. My parents could not get me out of the tide pools where I was looking at little creatures in the water. It was a seminal moment."

In high school she fell in love with acting, and then in college, with making documentary films. She was seeing a connection between the nature she loved and the arts, and she wanted to put them together to communicate what she learned.

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In the spring of 2001 she did the semester at sea. That fall, still as an Emerson College student, she went to New Zealand to videotape dolphins as an independent research project.

With the realization that she wanted to teach and give her students the same joy of learning about science in nature that she experienced when aboard the schooner, she went back to school after graduation to get her teaching certificate.

Now 32, she has been teaching science at Southport Middle School for five years and is also chairman of the school's science department. Her science lessons take seventh-graders into the Savannas Preserve State Park in Port St. Lucie several times a year to do research. They work in teams, teaching each other as they learn.

"One shy and very quiet boy who rarely spoke in class became quite a leader once he got out into the preserve," Veresan says. "He started explaining how to use a compass, and one of the other students noticed and said that 'he knows so much out here.'"

One of the best moments of her career came the day she took several students out into the state preserve in kayaks. They had never been on the water in a boat. Seeing them catch on to paddling and their excitement in identifying plant samples and their teamwork was exactly what she'd hoped for and was similar to what she had experienced during her time at sea, she said.

Science lessons are already serving as the springboard for lessons such as math and reading taught in other classes. Veresan said she would love to share her savannas lessons with teachers at other schools. She hopes that St. Lucie County

will one day have an environmental science magnet school, and she hopes to create an outdoor classroom at Southport Middle School.

Veresan was named Southport Teacher of the Year in the fall. In January she was named one of three finalists for St. Lucie County School District teacher of the year for 2011-2012. The results of the competition were pending at press time. *RP*

**Name:** Cristina Veresan

**Position:** Science teacher, Chairman of Science Dept., Southport Middle School, Port St. Lucie

**Age:** 32

**Education:** 2002 - B.A. Emerson College in Boston. Now one credit away from M. Ed from New England College

**Family:** Parents, Nancy Brown and Greg Veresan

**Birthplace:** Manistique, Mich.

**Residence:** Jensen Beach, since 2006. New Hampshire before that.

**How I got into teaching:** "Through my semester at sea experience doing research from aboard a tall ship."

**What I like most about teaching:** "I want to help my students uncover knowledge and to activate knowledge they already had."

**What most people don't know about me:** "I had a brief trombone career in middle school."



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