

Bringing the World to Her Classroom



National Geographic Grosvenor Teacher Fellow and NEC Alumna Connects Her Students to Global Environmental Issues

Making connections between polar bears in the Arctic and butterflies in Hawaii, and holding the attention of middle school students, is no small feat. But Cristina Veresan, MEd '11 is accomplishing exactly that.

A native New Englander, Cristina transferred to NEC's Masters in Education online program while a middle school life science teacher living in Florida. In 2012 Cristina moved to Hawaii where she teaches at Star of the Sea School in Honolulu. Cristina is a science teacher for grades six through eight, is chair of the science department, and serves as an assistant principal.

In 2014 Cristina was awarded a fellowship for the National Geographic Grosvenor Teacher Fellow Program. This prestigious fellowship provided Cristina a rare opportunity: a nine day expedition cruise through arctic Svalbard, located halfway between continental Norway and the North Pole. "I observed the wildlife of the region from the ship, as well as by kayak and from hiking excursions on the tundra," explains Cristina. Learning from on-board naturalists, guest speakers, and National Geographic photographers, she studied polar bears, great whales, plankton, sea birds, arctic fox, and Svalbard reindeer. She also explored arctic pack ice.

"Now I can connect my arctic experience with students through pictures and videos," noted Cristina. "I'm sharing that sense of place and teaching my students about topics like animal adaptation and plant anatomy using examples that are clearly very different from Hawaii." Cristina is working with her students to explore the local and global effects of climate change. "The issue of global climate change definitely connects our island with the arctic region. It's a central topic in my science classes."

Cristina has also implemented a new program at her school which investigates climate change in the local ecosystem. Students work in the field studying island forest, stream, and coastal systems, and develop their own conservation projects.

As she speaks, Cristina's enthusiasm for teaching is obvious. "I want to inspire my students to be explorers. I love creating learning experiences that change their perspective, build their curiosity, and create a sense of discovery and wonder in the natural world."

One of Cristina's most memorable arctic moments? Cruising along the face of Austfonna glacier, the third largest ice cap in the world. "We were looking up at a sheer wall of ice, with amazing colors and subtleties of blues and

whites. Everyone on deck was in silent awe. It really was amazing to be in such a pristine and remote place. I left the arctic with a renewed sense of urgency about protecting Polar Regions and our island.”

In addition to sharing her experiences with her students, Cristina shares with the community as well. She’s been interviewed on local radio and TV, been an active blogger, and presented at both the Hawaii Science Teachers Association conference and the National Science Teachers Association conference.

Speaking of New England College and her Masters in Education, Cristina said, “I had many online options but NEC offered the progressive, experiential focus I was looking for. The quality of online classes was excellent.”

The ability to transfer credits and connect with faculty was very important to Cristina. “I was not a traditional student and I needed flexibility. I received a lot of one-on-one communication about class work as well as valuable advice on how to develop my career.” Cristina adds “I benefitted greatly from the personal attention and mentorship of faculty, especially professors Carlton Fitzgerald and Debra Nitschke-Shaw.”

You might wonder how an online program can be experiential. According to Cristina, “I found I could relate assignments and tasks directly to my work as a teacher. The methods and philosophies I was learning were current and relevant. I never felt my learning was divorced from my real-life practice.”

Cristina has been teaching about nine years and says “classroom teaching brings me a lot of joy.” She also has a growing interest in school leadership. “I’m definitely interested in the possibility of founding a school or transforming an existing school that would feature a strong environmental focus.”

What’s next for this successful NEC alumna? “I was lucky enough to get two different fellowships in 2015. In August I will sail as a NOAA Teacher at Sea on a 20-day fisheries survey in the Gulf of Alaska, and in September I’ll be in Washington, DC serving an 11-month term in Senator Al Franken’s (D-MN) office as an Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow.” Experiential learning and results at its best!

LEARN MORE: Visit Cristina Veresan’s professional website: veresan.com and look for links to National Geographic, NOAA, and more.

