

Teachers heading off to exotic learning experiences

By Ruth Campbell rcampbell@oaoa.com | Posted: Monday, June 3, 2019 4:31 pm

Two Ector County Independent School District teachers will be heading off to adventures through the JASON Learning Argonaut Program this summer.

Priscilla Torres, an eighth-grade science teacher at Nimitz Middle school, is going research bees and pollinators in Costa Rica, and Rebecca Owens, who will be teaching sixth, seventh and eighth-grade science at Bonham Middle School this fall, is going to the Bahamas to research sea turtles.

Along with her JASON trip, Torres also was selected for the LiftOff Summer Institute at the Johnson Space Center, will be going on the Student Spaceflight Experiments Program trip to Washington, D.C., in July, learn about gun safety, archery and first aid in the wilderness in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

Buddy Hale, a longtime ECISD educator, set up the Wyoming trip. Torres said he was able to get a spot for her and one for sixth-grade teacher Tabitha Najera at Nimitz.

The LiftOff Summer Institute is a teacher conference that educators have to apply for. They ask questions about why you wanted to be a teacher, your interests, your interest in space and the lengthy application includes a lot of mini essays, Torres said.

“We get a lot of behind-the-scenes tours. We get to talk with astronauts and various scientists who are working with NASA,” Torres said.

“Then when I come back from there, I get to be home for a couple of days and then we’re going to go to the SSEP trip in Washington that’s when we take the six kids to Washington and they get to do their presentation at the national conference, so they’re excited about that. We’re all excited,” Torres said.

The conference is July 1 and July 2, but Torres said they will return July 5 so they get to spend July 4 in the nation’s capital. Six Nimitz sixth-graders will present their project titled “Activation of Clostridium Sporogenes, a novel cancer treatment in Microgravity.” The experiment, to be conducted on the International Space Station, will study how well the bacteria, Clostridium sporogenes, activates in a microgravity environment.

The results could potentially assist in cancer treatments for astronauts if they become exposed to radiation in space, a news release said.

For the bee study, Torres will be part of a research team from Earthwatch, a nonprofit environmental organization.



JASON Learning Argonaut Program

Rebecca Owens, will participate in the JASON Learning Argonaut Program in the Bahamas.

“JASON Learning has partnered with them. JASON Learning brings the teachers and students in, because students can also apply for it. Earthwatch is already doing the research. We’re just going to help them with their research process. They’ll show us proper ways of collecting samples. We’re going to learn how to identify ... the various bees and insects of the area,” Torres said.

She added that she takes a lot of professional development hours, not because she has to, but because there are so many different ways to teach students.

“I just like learning. There’s never an end to learning and I like bringing the stories and the pictures back to the kids in the classroom because it makes it more interesting for them. They’re more involved with conversations when they can ask questions that interest them, so I like to tie it back any way I can,” Torres said.

Torres said she has been interested in science since she was a little girl.

“I used to beg my parents to send me to space camp ...,” said Torres, who grew up in Harlingen.

She earned a bachelor’s degree in biology with a teacher certification from University of Texas at Brownsville, now UT Rio Grande Valley, and a master’s in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in science from University of Texas at Arlington.

“When I was little, one of the neighbors and I we would collect lizards and try to sell them like lemonade. I think people bought them just to let them go. I’ve always been into animals since I was little. I had an iguana,” Torres said.

Meanwhile, Owens at Bonham Middle School is heading to the Bahamas to study sea turtles in July.

“It’s amazing. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I love sea turtles and I love the thought of being able to study them and learn about how they live (in) their environment; what they do,” Owens said.

She added that it’s her understanding that researchers studying why sea turtles come back to same places every year and what draws them back.

Of the possible expeditions, Owens said her top choices were the Bahamas and the rain forest.

“I would have been thrilled with any expedition, but those were the two I was leaning toward, or hoping for,” Owens said.

She added that her class studied biomes, habitats, ecosystems and the animals and organisms in those environments, so anything she learns about environmental impacts on the animals will be useful in the classroom.

“My students every day come up with a new question for me,” Owens said.

She added that she has gotten questions about climate change and wants to use the information she brings back in all grade levels, so she’s going to be working with teachers on that.

“I’ll still be a classroom teacher, but I’ll give them information that I’ve learned. It doesn’t bother me to go into a classroom during my conference period and share my information and my experience and then they

can relay that to other classes ...,” and other teachers, Owens said.

She added that people should take a chance and apply to the JASON Learning program.

Owens has been teaching at ECISD for 15 years, spending 10 years at the elementary level before moving up to middle school.

Originally from Maryland, she moved west from the Annapolis area. Owens went to Odessa College and earned a bachelor of arts and humanities from the University of Texas Permian Basin.

Around her second year of teaching, Owens said, she fell in love with science. She moved up to fifth-grade science and has been teaching the subject ever since.

Before going into education, Owens was a legal assistant in Maryland for 10 years, worked as a legal secretary in the Ector County District Attorney’s office for 10 years and then went into teaching.

“The last five years of my legal experience is in correlation with my teaching work history. I mainly worked part-time for Allen Moore while I was teaching, working on the weekends, and mainly during breaks from school,” Owens said.

She added that she loves teaching, even on bad days. And being able to touch a child’s life in a positive way is priceless.

“... I can look back and say I helped them realize something, or changed their life for the better. To see them light up when you teach them something new ... just the expression on their face when we’re doing the different lab activities, there’s just something about it that’s so satisfying,” Owens said.

She’s had children of her own for 30 years and she said now is her time to do something that interests her.

“I just that I think this is an amazing opportunity that Chevron and JASON Learning and ECISD have put together. I’m so grateful to them. ... I don’t know if I would have this experience otherwise. And there’s not enough ways to tell them thank you and express my gratitude for being selected. It’s something you dream of, but don’t often think will happen. ... I’ve always thought of applying (but) when there are so many people (applying), you don’t think you stand a chance so it’s almost like winning the lottery,” Owens said.