

ECISD, OC students explore Hurt Ranch

Renowned scientist, photographer joins field trip

BY RUTH CAMPBELL

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Students from Ector County Independent School District high schools and Odessa College got a chance to look for archeological finds and animals Friday on the **Hurt Ranch** as part of the school district's PICK Education initiative aimed at bringing curriculum to life for **students**. Nine **students** from Permian and Odessa high schools and George H.W. Bush New Tech Odessa joined biochemist and photographer Igor Siwanowicz, tromped through a former caliche pit on the **Hurt** property, along **with** at least two **OC students** interested in photography and ECISD officials looking for ways to improve classroom environments.

ECISD Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne said **students** found fossils, tiny bones, rocks and nests. Specimens were collected in vials, or carried if they were too large. A small hognose snake found under a rock was the subject of several photos.

They also took video of their experiences on GoPro cameras as they hiked around. Osborne said he knew Siwanowicz from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which he took courses through. Through his work, Osborne said Siwanowicz brings the wild to people.

"A lot of folks are really scared of bugs and snakes and reptiles. He brings out the superstar in those critters and makes people think of them a little bit differently," Osborne said. He added that the idea of the trip was to learn about what's in people's back yards and prompt interest in their surroundings.

"The **Hurt** family gave us access to this to **explore**, which is amazing to because a lot of folks here don't have access to land," Osborne said.

He added that he thinks education should tie in **with** real experiences that can be shared.

"What we want to do is we want to record and document everything that we're doing in these field expeditions and we want to show how kids see things and experience things in the field," Osborne said. "That way we can share **with** other

>> See **FIELD TRIP** Page **5A**



ECISD Science Coordinator Ashley Bryant, left, photographer and biochemist Igor Siwanowicz, second from left, ECISD Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne and ECISD Chief Operations Officer David Finley, right, join teachers and **students** on a science field trip to the **Hurt Ranch** where they found small, rodent skeletal remains while exploring a caliche pit Friday morning.



Photographer and biochemist Igor Siwanowicz, left, points to a hog-nosed snake while Odessa College **students** Jairo Martinez, center, and Lucas Munoz take photographs Friday during a science field trip to the **Hurt Ranch**.

PHOTOS BY MARK STERKELI ODESSA AMERICAN

Field trip

>> From Page 1A

kids in classrooms. They ... see their cool finds and walk through the field experience as if they were there.”

Those experiences can then be pushed out onto the web so people can see how the district is trying to change up education, Osborne said.

Dressed in long shorts, flip flops, T-shirt, windbreaker and baseball-style cap, Siwanowicz said he had found scorpions, but he would have loved to see some horned toads. “For for local people it’s nothing, but I would be really excited,” Siwanowicz said.

He added that he hopes to visit again in the spring.

“I’m sure the diversity here is amazing. I will find lots of things I’ve never seen before. So far I’m not disappointed. I didn’t expect much because it’s October. ... But today is not over. We may still find something,” Siwanowicz said.

Raised by biologist parents in Krakow, Poland, Siwanowicz said he thinks he was interested in wildlife and nature since before he can remember.

“I grew up surrounded by illustrated textbooks and I loved browsing through them before I could even read. It wasn’t until 14 years ago, I was 26, and I got my first camera and then I started taking photos. It was sort of occupational therapy for me, but also an artistic endeavor and a creative outlet,” Siwanowicz said.

A biochemist by education, he was studying biotechnology and got his Ph.D. in structural biochemistry. He studied in Poland until he was “20 something,” then continued his education in Denmark and earned his doctorate in Munich, Germany. He has been at the Janelia Research Campus of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute for six years.

Siwanowicz said sharing his expertise **with the students** is “awesome.”

“The sooner you get them, the stronger impact you can make and I think people generally ... need to have more respect for nature and more admiration for natural design and the beauty of natural form,” he said.

Kejal Ahir and Soohelyta Kheang, both 17-yearold seniors at Permian High School, said the field trip was a great experience.

“I’m so glad that I came here,” Ahir said.

Both said the items they found were “cool.” Kheang said she never thought she would have a chance to look at the things she found and touch them.

Ahir said she would take her specimens back to class, show them to her teacher and share them **with** her classmates. She said she never thought about this area being any more than sand and oil rigs, but now she has a different perspective.

Jairo Martinez, a 22-year-old **OC** student who started studying photography in 2013, said it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to meet Siwanowicz. Living in West Odessa, he said he sees seashells every now and then.

Martinez said his favorite thing to photograph is bugs.

“I started getting into macrophotography a year ago. I thought it was interesting how something so small could be magnificent because you don’t take the time to look at it,” Martinez said.

Along **with** Osborne and Science Coordinator Ashley Bryant, Chief Operations Officer David Finley and Chief Technology Officer Kellie Wilks went on the field trip, as well, to see how learning environments and technology could be improved to engage more **students**.

“Innovative teaching requires innovative facilities and technology,” Finley said.

Betsy Triplett-**Hurt** said the caliche pits the groups walked through were created when Jones Brothers mined them to build Loop 338 decades ago. Caliche is the bedrock for roads, Triplett-**Hurt** said. The pits later became a dump ground and that’s why they are fenced off and gated, she said.

Pointing out some large rocks, Triplett-**Hurt** said they were too big to crush so they have wound up in parks and at Texas Tech University.

“I’m delighted the kids can come in and walk through here,” Triplett-**Hurt** said.



Permian High student Kejal Ahir holds a small animal skull that she found in a caliche pit during a science field trip Friday to the **Hurt Ranch**.

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Saturday, 10/08/2016 Page .A01

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