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Eisenhower teacher combs the world for her students' lessons

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As Jeannette Navarro's students come back to school today, she'll be waiting for them with vials of plankton, green zebra mussel samples and a video she shot of an erupting volcano.

The Eisenhower High School teacher spent a big chunk of her summer on two educational trips that took her to the forests of Costa Rica and the depths of the Great Lakes, seeking out engaging lessons and exotic mementos to bring back to her science class.

"I think it's a lot more motivating for students if they can get their hands on something," said Navarro, 28, of New Lenox. "Even though I can't get them on a boat out in the middle of Lake Michigan, they can see a video of how I got this stuff."

A Sandburg High School and Illinois State University graduate, Navarro said she's always been drawn to science for its seemingly endless mysteries and the fun of investigating them. Yet Navarro earned her teaching degree in special education and teaches in tandem with a certified science teacher at the Blue Island high school, a fact that administrator Carol Baker said makes Navarro stand out.

"If you were to watch her and her partner, you would never be able to tell who was the content and who was the special ed," said Baker, Community High School District 218's director of curriculum for science and music. "Jeannette's knowledge of science is so high because she's worked so hard. It's to her credit that she seeks out opportunities like these."

It was Baker who nominated Navarro for the Great Lakes trip, a weeklong expedition sponsored by the Centers for Ocean Sciences Education Excellence and paid for through an outside grant. Navarro and 14 others spent a week afloat on an EPA research vessel, poring over the wildlife and land formations in the lakes and their beaches.

"They gave us a lot of things we could bring back and share," Navarro said. "The captain even gave each of us a chance to steer the boat. I don't think anyone else has ever had that chance before."

As for the more exotic of Navarro's two summer excursions, a 10-day trek through Costa Rica hosted by the educational partnership Earth Expeditions, Navarro applied for the opportunity herself after hearing about the program through an acquaintance. The trip took her through the country's rain forests and cloud forests, where she went on fossil hikes, encountered a group of two dozen howler monkeys and waited patiently for an active volcano to erupt.

"It's not what you would think of as far as lava flowing everywhere," she said. "It was this steam cloud ... with red rocks shooting out of it."

The expedition also included a learning segment in which attendees scrutinized an element of the forest. Navarro honed in on the habits of leaf cutter ants, and she said she'd like to incorporate the same kind of freedom in her classes, giving students a chance to investigate what fascinates them.

"That's modeling what real scientists do. It's a higher level of thinking than just memorizing words and definitions," Navarro said. "Doing that type of work ... allows them to become more logical thinkers and to seek all sides of a situation. That process isn't just science, it's everything in life."

Now Navarro and teaching partner Vanessa Connor are working on lesson plans that use that method of teaching - along with Navarro's plankton and mussels - for the classroom this year. Connor, who's taught with Navarro for five years, said her teaching partner's hands-on style with their students extends beyond the science lessons they teach together.

"I've seen her with students in our classroom after school helping them with their algebra," Connor said. "She will go out of her way to help you."

As for Navarro, she's hoping that her packed summer was just the first of many she'll spend combing the globe and bringing back the best of it to her students.

"Even though I'm the teacher, I don't know everything," she said. "Traveling and doing things I can relate back to the classroom are definitely in my future."