

Former Grayslake Central teacher back from Borneo jungle

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Elephants and crocodiles and orangutans! Oh my!

Former Grayslake Central High School teacher Katie Titus Larson recently returned to the U.S. after spending about two weeks in tropical Borneo for a graduate primate conservation course and encountered a variety of animals.

“The views along the river and within the jungle are some of the richest, most beautiful scenes I have ever seen. I have been sweaty, full of mud, with bugs and leeches attacking me, but I have never been happier than in that jungle. Borneo has definitely stolen my heart!” Larson said.

She is enrolled in the Global Field Master’s Program through Miami University’s Project Dragonfly. About 120 people are admitted into the program, according to Connie Malone, Project Dragonfly senior program assistant.

“It’s a competitive application process — it’s not just something you sign up to do,” Malone said.

The program’s expedition courses help students understand how conservation strategies are successful while getting first-hand experience in another culture and environment, Malone said.

“It’s very eye-opening and is a very different way of living,” Malone said.

Larson said she enrolled in the Global Field Program because it teaches what community-based action can do for endangered species and how inquiry in the classroom can have impact.

“When we empower students and community members, there is no stopping what we can achieve,” Larson said.

Larson went to Borneo with 18 colleagues. A typical day was “jam-packed” with activities like tracking primates in a boat along the Kinabatangan River, crocodile tracking, frog studies and working with Pygmy elephant mitigators.

Elephants ruin crops, so mitigators put up fences and educate Borneo residents about the impact elephants have on the ecosystem, Larson said.

In addition to tracking wildlife, Larson and her classmates listened to presentations from conservationists about the work they do in Sabah (one of 13 states that is part of Malaysian Borneo, according to sabahtourism.com).

Larson stayed with a host family and sampled local food like fried bananas.

Her experiences taught her there are never “black and white” issues, such as rainforest getting torn down for palm oil plantations. However, the palm oil finances Malaysia’s modernization and provides jobs.

“The real challenge is to create community conservation opportunities so that the areas of the forest that are still in tact can be maintained,” Larson said.

Once she completes her degree, she said she is likely to teach English as a foreign language. She graduated from Grayslake Central High School and then spent six years teaching there.

She is relocating to Spain with her husband in August.

“I will miss Grayslake, but we are taking the road less traveled and pursuing our dreams of living overseas,” Larson said.

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