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Heights Middle teacher ships out with the NOAA

Staff Writer
Posted: 04/22/2011 01:00:00 AM MDT

— By Jenny Kane —
The Daily Times

FARMINGTON — Pictures of ocean sunsets and word about leaping dolphins led some of Nathan Pierantoni's students to believe their teacher had gone on a cruise.

"Will you get me a souvenir?" one student asked Pierantoni on his blog.

"What type of food will you eat?" another asked.

Little did they know, it was all work and no play for their teacher.

"We didn't pull over and go swimming. We didn't dock and watch the sunset," said Pierantoni, a gifted program and science class instructor at Heights Middle School. He returned from sea Saturday.

Though he did spend most of the first week in April on a 96-foot vessel coasting off the heel of southern Florida, Pierantoni was one of less than 30 teachers nationwide chosen to conduct research with some of the country's foremost oceanography experts.

He returned to a dusty land-locked hometown, but the knowledge he brought back is invaluable, Pierantoni said.

Teachers chosen for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Teacher at Sea program all go on their own trips. They can be sent on any expedition around the world, helping experts study everything from hydrographic surveys to ocean weather. The ship on which Pierantoni sailed, the Walton Smith, was all about water quality.

"I have really been struck by the similarities between graduate level scientific research and the science projects that many of my students have worked so hard



on for this year's science fair," Pierantoni wrote on his last day at sea.

And, in fact, that is the point of the program. Teachers at Sea helps instructors convey to their students basic lessons in more enthralling ways.

"Having a teacher that participates in research experience is not something that most students get," said deputy director of NOAA Teacher at Sea Elizabeth McMahon. "To have a teacher that can say, 'I've done the research and I know what I'm talking about' — it really has an impact."

On Pierantoni's expedition, he worked to collect water samples on what is the "longest running set of ocean observation on the planet."

The operation has run for 20 years now, and Pierantoni contributed to it. He operated heavy equipment, worked by moonlight and did a lot of lab work to get the job done, he said. He lived in cramped quarters and slept through the

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"numbingly loud" sound of engines. All the while, the students kept track of his location, his research, the ocean conditions, and, of course, the cool sea life he saw along the way.

"As I sit on the deck of the boat writing this, a pod of bottlenose dolphins has joined us! We are cruising at about 7 knots and they are leaping out of the water at the edge of our wake," Pierantoni wrote in his blog.

But the real message of his blog continued to be the parallels between classroom lessons and real life lessons.

"I think that's as important as the science itself," said Pierantoni, explaining that if the science comes from real life, and not necessarily the pages of a book, it will affect students greatly.

Sharing with students that the weather starts at the ocean, and that New Mexico used to be underwater, helps them see that they too are connected to the distant ocean, he said.

"Science has to be brought to life for kids," Pierantoni said.

Jenny Kane:

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