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Redondo Beach SEA Lab program manager returns from American Samoa fieldwork

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Posted: 04/29/2012 07:04:45 AM PDT

Updated: 04/29/2012 12:21:07 PM PDT



SEA Lab program manager Maria Madrigal recently returned from American Samoa where she was immersed in the two-week Teacher at Sea program. (Scott Varley / Staff Photographer)

At night, Maria Madrigal would fall asleep to the rocking of the South Pacific Ocean.

Her days started early aboard the 224-foot boat she and a team of scientists temporarily called home as they surveyed fish populations off American Samoa.

Sometimes, Madrigal could look down 50 feet into the clear water beneath her and spot fish and corals she'd never seen before.

"I actually miss being rocked to sleep," said Madrigal, who returned to her job last week as the program manager at the Redondo Beach SEA Lab.

She recently finished her fieldwork with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Teacher at Sea program, which links up educators with scientists doing fisheries research around the globe.

Madrigal, 34, was chosen along with 24 other educators this year from a pool of 225 Teacher at Sea applicants. Her assignment was to join the crew of the NOAA ship Oscar Elton Sette, which is named for a pioneer in the development of fisheries oceanography.

She met the boat at port in Pago Pago on March 29 and spent two weeks working with field scientists assessing fish populations in the shallow and deepwater coral reef environments around the island of Tutuila.

Started in 1990, the federal program "requires a certain type of teacher," Director Jennifer Hammond said, as participants put in long days and can spend anywhere from two weeks to a month away from their homes and jobs. Mostly classroom teachers are accepted, she added, but NOAA also looks for "informal educators" such as Madrigal who work in museums and aquariums.

"Maria is a perfect example because she has a broad range of students who come into her facility," Hammond said.

Madrigal hadn't set out to become an educator, nor was she raised to love the water - so for those reasons she never expected to find herself on a boat trip with strangers in the South Pacific. A longtime Compton resident, Madrigal said she almost



SEA Lab program manager Maria Madrigal hopes to take what she learned from her two weeks in the Teacher at Sea program in American Samoa and apply it to the programs at the SEA Lab. (Scott Varley / Staff Photographer)

drowned as a young child, which stuck with her for years and kept her from learning to swim.

But her perspective began to change after graduating from Loyola Marymount University, where she majored in studio arts and minored in natural sciences. On the hunt for a full-time job in 1999, she found the SEA Lab while looking for opportunities with the federal AmeriCorps program.

Back then, the small aquarium run by the Los Angeles Conservation Corps was just getting off the ground and had only two staff members. She was hired as a so-called corps member, a job paying minimum wage.

"I basically learned how to float when I first started here," Madrigal said. "My boss at the time said, 'We're going to kayak, and I'll take you guys snorkeling.'"

The more she was exposed to the water, the more comfortable she felt around it.

And at the same time she moved up the ladder as the aquarium grew, spending some time away to earn a master's degree in ecological teaching and learning from Lesley University in Massachusetts.

Madrigal's current job at the SEA Lab is to oversee education programs as well as the corps members. They typically work there for a year to 18 months, receiving job skills training and educational opportunities. Seventy to 80 percent of the workers are at-risk teenagers, and some have dropped out of high school.

That doesn't describe Madrigal, whose parents are Mexican immigrants who worked factory jobs while putting their three daughters through Catholic grade school and high school.

But Brent Scheiwe, the SEA Lab's program director, said Madrigal has an "endearing sort of relationship" with the young workers. "She is able to provide support not just on a professional level, but on multiple levels for the corps members," he said.

Madrigal hopes her Teacher at Sea experience will pay off for the SEA Lab in different ways.

For one, she saw scientists at work exploring different methods of surveying ocean ecosystems - using divers, underwater video stations and an autonomous underwater vehicle to collect data at various depths. The information could be useful in determining whether areas are overfished, she said, and she hopes to incorporate some of the science into aquarium programs.

And the trip also opened her eyes to the NOAA jobs that might one day appeal to Conservation Corps members - not just research and science positions, but deckhands, stewards, fishermen and other positions needed on the agency's vessels.

"The reason that they're with us is because they don't know what they want to do," Madrigal said of her young workers. "The biggest thing that I think I took away from this experiment is the different career paths people can take."

And there were personal benefits, too.

On a blog Madrigal created to chronicle her experience, she wrote that the learning environment offered her "the joy of discovery."

A day at sea "was filled with beautiful coral reefs visible through crystal clear blue waters, flying fish soaring above the water, turtles swimming and diving," she said. "It evoked the excitement of the child within me."

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On the Web

For more on the Teacher at Sea program, link to: <http://teacheratsea.noaa.gov/>

For Madrigal's blog: <http://bit.ly/Ii76u0>