

# Arctic trek to help Jenks teacher inspire students

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For Jenks West Intermediate Media Specialist Alicia Gillean, being part of an Arctic research team will be an opportunity to indulge her love of science and exploration. For her fifth and sixth grade students, it will be an opportunity to realize the importance of asking questions, chasing curiosity and diving into the world around them.

Gillean, 30, was chosen in November to participate in the PolarTREC research expedition at Toolik Research Station in conjunction with the University of Alaska.

PolarTREC, which stands for Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation. The group's mission is to encourage inquiry-based learning among students and to help teachers learn about the polar regions, so they can pass that information

on to students, according to the group's website.

For her part, Gillean will work with a team of five scientists from the University of Alaska to monitor the daily habits of Arctic ground squirrels.

The squirrels were chosen because of their strict daily schedules, which remain unaffected by the extreme stretches of light and darkness in the Arctic Circle.

"They're one of the only animals that maintain a rigid schedule, even though it's 24 hours of daylight or 24 hours of darkness," Gillean said. "These guys are on a rigid schedule, and these scientists want to know why."

Gillean's expedition will begin May 30, when she will take an eight-hour truck ride north from Fairbanks, Alaska, along the Dalton Highway, a route known for its role in the television series "Ice Road Truckers."

Once she arrives with her team, known affectionately

as "Team Squirrel," Gillean will spend until June 27 working at Toolik field station alongside about 100 scientists conducting research in a variety of fields.

Gillean attributes her selection from 200 applicants largely to her previous research experience, a program called Adventures At Sea, sponsored by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration during the summer of 2012.

During that time, Gillean spent 11 days on board the Hugh R. Sharp with a team of 11 other researchers as part of an annual sea scallop survey in the northern Atlantic.

That experience, which included everything from tracking data to shucking scallops, helped make Gillean a strong fit for PolarTREC.

"They were interested in my science background and what I could bring to the team," she said. "They liked that I had experience

working with a team of scientists. They know I'm not going to be grossed out by anything they throw my way."

Gillean's career path has always been guided by a love of marine biology kindled during her high school years at Union High School. While in school at Oklahoma Baptist University, she interned at the Oklahoma Aquarium, later becoming an education specialist there.

She joined Jenks Public Schools in 2006 as a sixth-grade teacher at West Intermediate, and in 2010 earned a master's degree and became the school library media specialist.

Gillean spent Monday morning using her Adventures at Sea experiences to teach students about the scientific process.

"They were seeing what they could observe, what were they thinking about, thinking like a scientist," she said. "Just letting them really see what science is really like out there, and



**NICK DEMOSS/ SOUTH COUNTY LEADER**  
 School library media specialist Alicia Gillean will travel in June to Toolik Research Station in the Arctic, where she will join a team of five scientists to study Arctic Ground Squirrels. She plans to use the experience to show her Jenks West Intermediate students that science can be an exciting, hands-on career.

that it's not just a boring subject in school, it's something they can be a part of is really neat."

To keep up with Gillean's trip, visit [www.polartrec.com](http://www.polartrec.com), where she will keep a blog including photos and video during her time there.