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# Everett science teacher wins presidential award

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EVERETT - Minds come alive in Barney Peterson's classroom at James Monroe Elementary School as fourth-graders get their hands dirty exploring the natural world.

Students raised 400 coho salmon in their classroom, then released them into streams and watched them spawn.

They've gazed through a telescope to see how a crow with two feet and a beak can construct an architectural feat out of twigs.

Rain or shine, they dig in the dirt and the muck to tuck native plants along river embankments in need of some shoring up.

They turn to books and the experts who visit them to write research papers about everything from skunk cabbage to grizzly bears.

"There's a big world out there besides their television sets," said Peterson of Brier. "They're going to be voting and making decisions when I'm in the old teachers' home. I'd just as soon they be good decisions.

"And if they're connected to where they live, they can do that."

Peterson recently returned from Washington, D.C., where she was given the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching.

It's the nation's highest honor for teaching in these fields.

Peterson was the only teacher from Washington and one of 93 honored nationwide.

Along with a paid trip to the nation's capital - her first - she received a \$10,000 award from the National Science Foundation.

Peterson said she's mulling how to spend the money. Ideas include buying specialized microscopes for the classroom. She likely would use the rest of the money to pay for further professional training, and dreams of going to Antarctica.

Peterson is "a teacher who makes learning science come alive and fit into every other aspect of learning in her classroom," Principal Gerard Holzman said.

"Her fourth-grade class uses their environmental conservation experiences to make math relevant, read and research about the world they explore, and write to teach others what they have learned."

Suzi Wong Swint has worked with Peterson on a variety of projects through Snohomish County's watershed education program, which she coordinates.

"She has a knack for teaching her students how to wonder and how to think about issues," Swint said. "I teach youth and adults and, honestly, some of the best questions I've ever had have come from her fourth-grade students."

Peterson was nominated for the award by a colleague, then had to complete an involved application process, including videotaping a class and explaining her methods.

Peterson said she keeps three questions in front of her at her desk: "What are you doing? Why are you doing it? How will it

impact my students' learning?"

As a child who spent her fair share of time in the hallway for the wiggles, Peterson designs her questions so the answers often involve hands-on work.

During a recent class session, students in Peterson's class saw how water acts when it hits the soil from three directions, demonstrating how tributaries converge to form deltas.

The kids were focused and diligent about their predictions. During a follow-up time to analyze what happened, nearly every hand went up in the room for questions and answers.

"I think it's fun because we have (science) every day," said SemaJ Chambers, 10.

Morgan Joyce, 10, said their teacher knows about different kinds of sciences and passes that knowledge on to them by asking them questions and posing experiments.

"We're actually doing it," the girl said. "We can watch it happen. You can see what happens like outside."

Peterson's own passion for science started on the long walks she would take Saturdays as a young girl with her father, a self-taught naturalist.

On the walks through the woods and around the mill ponds surrounding Eugene, Ore., her father would point out plants and identify them.

Money in the family was tight. So much of their time was spent outdoors, such as picnics to old gravel pits, making every excursion a learning opportunity.

"That's what I see in the kids now," Peterson said. "They're missing that connection to where they live."

With a curiosity and enthusiasm to match that of her students, the teacher works to change that. "If I can get them excited, they'll carry it on all on their own," she said.

In an effort to find new ways to keep kids excited about learning, Peterson has been to Vienna, Austria, to study polar science and on a NOAA boat through the Aleutian Islands. She has brought NASA into the classroom through weather stations and special projects. She coordinates with Snohomish County's watershed education program on a number of ventures, such as a new effort to digitally map native plant species.

Peterson - a parks director by training - started teaching in 1989 after raising four sons. All the past 18 years have been spent at James Monroe Elementary.

Her husband is semi-retired. But at age 61, she's "absolutely not" ready for the same switch.

Passing in the halls the other day, she noted a kindergartner and thought, "I can hardly wait 'til that kid is in my room."

"When that stops," she said, "I'll fill out the paperwork. But I'm still window shopping in the primary grades."

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