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Graduate classroom takes educator to 'global hotspots'

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Perky Smith-Hagadone

Perky Smith-Hagadone stands in dense jungle at the Iwokrama International Center for Conservation in Guyana, one of three ecologically fragile 'hot spots' in which she studied during her recent graduate program in teaching. (Courtesy photo)



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By DAVID GUNTER Feature correspondent | 2 comments

SANDPOINT — Think twice before deleting that next email. It could just be the key that opens the door to a life-changing adventure.

That proved to be the case for Perky Smith-Hagadone, principal at Northside Elementary School. About three years ago, a note popped up in her inbox that would have been easy to ignore, even easier to click off into the world of cast-off messages.

"It was a little, obscure email that said, 'Earn your masters, travel the world and learn about conservation,'" said the educator, who not only read the note, but also signed up for the graduate degree program through Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. "It has been a life-changing program."

The three-year, online program included a component that separated it from similar curricula — each academic session included a travel component that Smith-Hagadone described as "a real-time classroom in global hotspots around the world."

"Hot," in these instances, referred to the fact that each location was considered ecologically fragile.

Her travels took her first to Belize, where the 18 students enrolled in the master's program worked at a conservation-minded zoo that was created to save injured and orphaned animals and teach Belizean children to respect and care for native wildlife.

After another year of online classes, the group met in Australia, where they worked at an aquarium charged with the preservation of the Great Barrier Reef.

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"It's mind-blowing — you wouldn't believe the things we've done," said Smith-Hagadone, adding that the second trip included underwater classroom time as the students helped locate and chronicle environmental damage to the world's largest coral reef. "I scuba dived with sharks."

That particular encounter was made more surprising because the grad student had closed her eyes as she descended to the correct depth — a technique she thought would maintain her calm during the initial dive. When she opened her eyes, she was nose-to with a reef shark. The large fish took measure of this interloper and simply glided by.

This year, the graduate cohort traveled to Guyana, South America, to study in the 1 million-acre Iwokrama International Center for Conservation. Half of the densely jungled acreage is set aside as a wilderness preserve, where the indigenous population is allowed to take part in monitored hunting. The other half is designated as a sustainable use area, where native people are involved in the process of cataloging every tree and listing which species are taken out as part of creating a sustainable approach to logging.

"It was probably the most significant trip," Smith-Hagadone said. "We were flown into what they call the hinterlands, where they have nine indigenous tribes living in the interior.

"They're visionaries," she continued. "I've never seen or heard of anything like what they're trying to do there."

In other parts of the country, local organizations are developing ways to promote eco-tourism and researching effective means of farming in the rain forest through crop rotation and a system that relocates planting areas to let the forest regenerate.

"But the big problem in Guyana is gold mining," the Northside principal said. "They haven't figured that out yet."

International mining companies hire local workers to clear-cut the forest, strip the soil away hydraulically and then use toxic chemicals to process the gold on site.

"And then they just walk away," Smith-Hagadone said. "It's really a problem for them.

"They desperately want to preserve what they have and they don't even want the gold — they have no use for it," she said of the Guyanese people. "It's the world outside that wants the gold, because it's used for things like producing iPads and cellphones."

And while the native people might not have a lust for the gold itself, the products it helps create have begun to drive a wedge between elders seeking to preserve the old ways and the environment and younger citizens who crave what the material world offers.

"The problem is the kids who are moving to the gold mines, because they can make a lot of money," said Smith-Hagadone. "They're lured there by all of our toys.

"They want what the rest of the developed countries have and it's a big mistake that's happening everywhere in the world."

Asked if she harbors any hope that this tide can be stemmed, the principal said her on-the-ground experience in South America changed her perspective on the weighty question.

"When I first got into this program, I was genuinely worried about our future as a people," she admitted. "If you use up all of your resources, if your animals are gone and your water is too dirty to drink, who's going to disappear? We are.

"But people are working very hard every single day — in really important ways — to make changes. And that has made me hopeful."

The educator has put the learning to work in her own life and in her school. At home, she no longer luxuriates under the hot water of an extended shower, preferring instead to take the kind of showers she learned about in her travels — water on briefly to get wet; water off to soap up and shampoo; water on again just long enough to rinse off.

In the academic setting, Smith-Hagadone fulfilled the master's program requirement that each student craft and implement a master plan for conservation by working with Northside teachers Amy Bradetich, Jayne Sturm and Mike McNelley to write a hands-on, inquiry-based science curriculum. Using funds provided by a Panhandle Alliance for Education grant, they hosted an in-service presentation of the curriculum for all fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade teachers in the district.

First piloted at Northside and also adopted by Sagle Elementary, the science lessons yank students out of the theoretical and place them right in the thick of things. At her own school, the principal used cafeteria waste as a laboratory for change. Over the course of several school days, she took all the garbage from breakfast and lunch and dumped it on a large, blue tarp outside the school — a graphic look at just how much waste was being generated by the students themselves.

As part of the inquiry based curriculum, the kids were challenged to come up with solutions to the trash issue.

"It was one of the most powerful things you've ever seen," said Smith-Hagadone.

Based on student research and recommendations, Northside now uses real silverware instead of throwing plastic utensils away every day — a change the principal would like the rest of the district cafeterias to implement. Solid waste has been drastically reduced as the kids recycle everything they can and route other material into the school's skyrocketing composting program.

"All of the compost goes into our edible, organic garden," the principal explained. "Our garden has grown from three mounds to 15 raised beds and a hoop house. In the fall, two-thirds of our harvest goes to the Northside kitchen and one-third goes to the food bank.

"The kids love it," she added. "It matters to them that they're making a difference. So often, people don't think it's a big deal to be the one person who made a change, but there's a ripple effect."

Smith-Hagadone, whose projects at Northside will be included in a soon-to-be-published article she wrote for *Science & Children* magazine, will graduate from the Miami University program in December. Her degree will read: Master's in the Art of Teaching: Zoology.

The degree title might be somewhat misleading. Perhaps it should say: Master's in Global Awareness, or Master's in Hope for the Planet. Then again, Master's in Personal Transformation might not be a bad name, either.

"This has been the most remarkable educational experience of my life — I can't imagine anything paralleling it," Smith-Hagadone said. "When you take the time to think about your actions and then alter your behavior, it's the most amazing feeling in the world."