

Creech Elementary art teacher Natalie Sansom visits Patara Elephant Farm in Thailand, learning how to feed, bathe, and care for elephants.

Journey of Learning

Katy teachers embark on enriching adventures and bring their knowledge back to the classroom

Written by Heather Lowrie



Sansom works with refugees from Burma who are members of Art Reach International



Schmalz Elementary teacher Margaret Frank with a group of guides in Maunabo, Puerto Rico, who led her on a tour through town



On her trip to Thailand, Sansom visited a cotton factory in Chiang Mai, where she watched girls weave cotton into cloth

Ask a teacher what they did on their summer vacation and you might hear about a family vacation, time at the beach, or even an adventurous camping trip. Ask a Katy ISD Fund for Teachers grant recipient what they did over their summer vacation, and you will hear all about their travels to Puerto Rico, Alaska, and even Thailand. Stephanie Montez, a sixth-grade science teacher at Katy Junior High, shares, “It was an opportunity to become a better teacher that I couldn’t ignore.”

Empowering Educators
Since 2001, the Fund for Teachers (FFT) program has awarded more than \$15.9 million to over 4,400 teachers. FFT fellowships have taken place in

120 countries and on every continent, specifically empowering teachers to explore unlimited ideas, terrains, and cultures. Ultimately, they bring back the ideas and knowledge they acquire to share with students in the classroom for a unique learning experience.

The application for the program becomes available each October, with the deadline taking place in January. Margaret Frank, a third-grade teacher at Schmalz Elementary says, “FFT just needs to be accessed. It takes time to develop the proposal, but it is worth it. Even if you aren’t awarded a grant, you can rework and resubmit your grant

proposal in subsequent years, so there really is no reason not to try.” Several Katy ISD teachers took advantage of this opportunity, successfully completed a grant, and were awarded the ultimate cultural education experience of their life.

Traveling Through Thailand

Natalie Sansom, an art teacher at Creech Elementary, began the process by writing a grant, describing where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do. She gave a specific breakdown of what her trip would cost. She also included why this specific trip would be meaningful to her students, school, and community.

Sansom says, "My grant was to explore cultural and natural environments of Thailand, while creating an art exchange and cross-cultural learning program." She got a head start on the experience by having her current students create postcards, writing in both English and Thai, so when she arrived in Thailand, she was able to give those cards to her students that she met along the way. "I was able to attain a comprehensive understanding of Thai culture, learning about Thai arts, education, people, and the environment," Sansom shares. "Being an art teacher, these things will be great components to my curriculum."

One of her many memories was working with refugees from Burma that couldn't go to school, and some of them even had to leave early to sell flowers on the street until late in the evening. The impact the children had on Sansom is something a textbook can't replicate; it is a real-life moment that will be forever etched in her mind.

Puerto Rican Paradise

Margaret Frank, a third-grade teacher at Schmalz Elementary, was awarded her grant to visit Puerto Rico. "Through this grant, I was able to realize many long-held dreams, [like] traveling to Puerto Rico, taking pictures of nature, learning about the

culture of the Caribbean, and energizing my own thinking," says Frank. "Sometimes, we settle into our lives, and while that is comforting, it is the reaching out and asking questions that helps us grow both personally and professionally." And there is nothing more energizing than wading in the ocean with pipefish, driving through the jungle, exploring a mangrove forest, and even riding horseback through the foothills near the El Yunque rainforest.

Frank was also able to meet with a community group in the town of Maunabo. They educate the youth about their natural resources for the main purpose of enhancing their very own community. Part of the joy of this adventure is not just seeing the beauty of the country, but the heart of the people.

An Alaskan Adventure

Stephanie Montez had a bit of a challenge when she was writing her grant. She wanted to find a place that she could travel with her husband David, who is also a Katy ISD teacher. It was important that the grant satisfy the science aspect of her job, while also including the social studies aspect of her husband's teaching job. Together, they decided that Alaska would be a great fit and they were awarded this great opportunity to

see glaciers, the process of weathering, and erosion. Her husband focused on the Gold Rush and the impact it had on Alaska, as well as the Russian influence on the state, since the U.S. had purchased Alaska from Russia. Together, the Montez team traveled on a seven-day cruise, stopping briefly in Canada.

"It made me realize that I have to keep educating myself," shares Montez. "I must find different ways to teach my students, because all students do not learn the same way. It has also shown my family that if you work on your craft and aspire to greater things, you will be rewarded." Montez feels blessed to have been given the \$7,500 gift to take this trip of a lifetime.

Impacting Lives

Starting a new school year with such incredible adventures to share with the students will create an environment that kids will love and want to be involved in. **KM**

HEATHER LOWRIE is a former fourth-grade teacher who loves to encourage people through her writing. She has three kids and is married to the love of her life. She looks forward to the day when she can return to the classroom and apply for the exciting and educational FFT program.



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