

Teacher triumphs in Siberia

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For a Greensboro earth science teacher, it was a little like getting to place the last piece in a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle.

Except that this particular puzzle is a 3.6-million-year-old lake in the middle of the 30-below Siberian tundra.

There, at the top of the world, the only inhabitants are hard-living silver miners and a team of multinational scientists seeking to expand the global climate record by drilling to the bottom of the most undisturbed place on Earth.

And when the 180,000-pound offshore rig finally hit bottom 1,627 feet down and brought up samples of rock at 4:45 p.m. on April 14, guess who got to do the honors, alongside a German grad student?

It was Tim Martin, intrepid Greensboro Day middle school teacher, who spent a month on the one-of-a-kind expedition after his application was chosen from a pool of 225 educators.

When Martin arrived in late March at the camp near the shore of Lake El'gygytyn, the drilling had been in progress for months. In a remote area believed untouched by glaciers, the object was to gather a record of climate history, and look for previous cycles of rapid change like the present.

Within the multinational team, funded by foundations in Russia, Germany, the U.S., Switzerland and Canada, a pool with a 5-Euro kitty speculated as to the exact time and depth of when the drilling would hit rock bottom in "Lake E," as the team called it.

The afternoon of April 14, Martin and the German grad student hit pay dirt.

As the rig, much like an oil drill, boomed away for another 12-hour shift, Martin slid out one more plastic tube, much like all the others. But inside, instead of ice or sediment, there was rock.



Greensboro Day middle school teacher Tim Martin captured the stark beauty of El'gygytyn snowscapes in Siberia in some of his photographs.

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[Tim Martin's travel journal from Siberia](#)

Video highlights

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[Intro to the lake](#)

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Immediately, a radio call went out. The \$10 million mission had been accomplished.

“The photos I took of the rocks were some of the first sent to scientists around the world,” the Greensboro teacher, back in his classroom this month, said. “To be rubbing shoulders with the top scientists, to know that I had a hand in gathering that evidence ... was kind of exciting.”

Bagging and tagging the 3.6-million-year-old scientific evidence, which will now be shipped to Germany and later the U.S. for study, was the crescendo for Martin, but far from the only highlight.

He saw the Northern Lights, photographed them until his camera battery froze, then watched them, dumbstruck for another hour.

Martin photographed a Siberian Polar wolf, one of the rare instances of wildlife on the barren terrain around Lake E, but only from a distance. Guides warned that the over-sized wolf's food supply is scarce enough that team members could represent a meal.

As for the camp rations, those were not a highlight. After a grueling trip from Moscow on a Russian domestic airliner, where most of his fellow passengers' carry-on luggage consisted of fifths of vodka, Martin worked up an appetite over 12-hour shifts working the rig.

But the Siberian menu, all of it flown in from afar, consisted of either borscht with a hefty dollop of mayonnaise in place of sour cream floating in the middle, or macaroni slathered in beef and gravy.

“Breakfast, lunch and dinner,” Martin said, repressing a burp. “When you're working, you get hungry. When you're hungry, you'll eat anything.”

The sculpted beauty of the Siberian landscape continually impressed him — as did the harsh conditions and history.

Flying in, Martin got a glimpse of some of the abandoned labor camps where, under Lenin and Stalin, political prisoners worked as slaves, as documented in Solzhenitsyn's “Gulag Archipelago.”

But arriving at the camp, there was also the powerful sight of three flags of three superpowers — at various times, bitter enemies in the last century — now flying together, united in a different crusade.

Russia, Germany, the U.S., all sending their brightest scientists to drill down to the bottom of a lake blasted out by an asteroid, to see what answers it could yield about the climate change threatening our planet 3.6 million years later.

“I'm not a flag-waver,” Martin said, “but to grow up in the Cold War, thinking that Russia was our enemy, and now see those flags flying together. That's a powerful statement.”

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