

The Oregonian

OSU professor finds her sea legs

The Monday Profile: Dawn Wright

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CORVALLIS -- Oregon's professor of the year had dreamed of exploring the oceans since she was a child playing in the Hawaiian surf, reading sea adventures and watching Jacques Cousteau on TV.

Then on her first research voyage as a graduate student, Dawn Wright made an awful discovery.

She got seasick.

"I thought after all these years and all these plans, maybe this is not the field for me," she recalls.

Over the years, the seasick oceanographer has been on 21 expeditions. Without fail, she spends the first two days of each trip nauseated.

"Deep-Sea Dawn," as she is known at Oregon State University, has emerged as an international leader in mapping the ocean floors and a model for bringing her research to life in the classroom.

Wright recently was named the state's top professor by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. She was one of 41 professors nationwide honored for their teaching and commitment to undergraduates.

Wright breaks the stereotype that great researchers aren't great teachers. Like many new college instructors, she had no formal teacher training and little classroom experience when she joined OSU's geoscience department in 1995.

Teaching "was something I had to work super hard at," she says. "It didn't come naturally to me."

But Wright's students say she seems equally at home in a classroom or on the ocean, infusing her lessons and lab with a sense of fun despite the technical nature of her work.

Her office and lab reflect her playful side, with Lego models, pirate decorations and research computers named Jack Sparrow, Swashbuckler and Blackbeard. The lab's name: Davey Jones' Locker.

Wright captures students' attention by doing the unexpected, such as dressing as a pirate or having students create a living map of the Willamette River with each student representing a grid cell. She sometimes plays music from SpongeBob SquarePants, one of her favorite cartoons, before class starts.

Yet she couldn't be more serious about the importance of encouraging the next generation of scientists, especially young women and students of color.

"I think Dawn approached (teaching) like everything else in life and said, 'If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it well,'" says Michelle Kinzel, a second-year graduate student. "In everything she does, there's just no mediocre."

Wright, a 46-year-old bicyclist with shoulder-length dark brown curls and a warm smile, was drawn to a life exploring and mapping the ocean floors.

The vastness, freedom and solitude of the ocean caught her imagination and inspired her to pursue a career in oceanography.

"The exploration part really appealed to me," she says. "Scientifically, we still don't know a lot about the oceans."

Her work sometimes takes her to ocean depths in a small submersible, most recently to investigate the deep corals off the coast of American Samoa. Her specialty is the marine applications of geographic

information systems.

"It's like being in a little spaceship," she says. "It's amazing what you can see out of a small porthole."

Wright brings her excitement about her research to the classroom, her students say.

Todd Jarvis, a former student who now serves as associate director of OSU's Institute for Water and Watersheds, remembers that Wright once showed a photo of herself dismantling and repairing electrical equipment on a voyage to illustrate how difficult data collection can be.

"You could see that this information just wasn't out there in cyberspace," Jarvis says. "Someone had to go get it, and someone had to collect it and process it. Not everything works as planned."

Jarvis also recalls seeing Wright dress as a pirate to captivate hundreds of middle school students who came to campus to learn about geographic information systems.

"The room just explodes when she gets on the stage," Jarvis says. "She tries to show it's pretty darn fun being a scientist. She connects at all levels."

That's a skill that some college professors never master, says Peter Saunders, director of OSU's Center for Teaching and Learning, a support service for faculty and graduate teaching assistants.

On evaluations, students often say that excellent teachers are those who really care about both teaching and their subject matter, Saunders says. But professors often leave their passion at the lecture hall door.

"It's not technique only," he says. "It's the passion, then you add the technique to that."

When Wright started teaching, she says, the hardest part was remembering to include all the details in her lessons and breaking them down clearly for students.

She learned by observing other teachers and lecturers and getting advice from her mother, Jeanne Wright, a retired college instructor and administrator. Her mother told her to try to be herself and make eye contact with the students.

Teaching feels more natural to her now. But "I think I'm still learning how to teach," Wright says. "Teaching is a never-ending labor of love."

Despite her heavy research and teaching schedule, Wright tries to connect with each of her students, even in a large lecture class.

In her 300-student oceanography class, which she teaches with another professor, students are required to come to office hours at least once each term. Her first-year graduate students meet with her weekly.

Helping to put students at ease is Wright's dog, Lydia, who wears a blue jacket declaring her the "OSU Geosciences Departmental Dog" and has special permission to roam the building.

Wright gives students her full attention, says Kinzel, who has Wright as an adviser.

"She really does take care of her students," Kinzel says. "It doesn't feel like it's pressure, like it's punitive. It feels like she's helping you through something that you want to accomplish."

Wright has remained committed to teaching at OSU instead of pursuing outside opportunities.

Being a college professor is "not just about teaching, not only about research, but usually a mix of teaching, research and service," she says. "I enjoy it all immensely and could not imagine doing something else."

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Box - Dawn Wright:

Job: Geosciences professor at Oregon State University

Age: 46

Education: Bachelor's degree in geology, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Ill., 1983; master's in oceanography, Texas A&M University, 1986; Ph.D., physical geography and marine geology, UC-Santa Barbara, 1994

Family: Single. Her dog, Lydia, comes to work with her and is the mascot of the geosciences department.

Who inspired her: OSU professors Jane Lubchenco, Bob Duncan, Gordon Matzke, and Aaron Wolf, who she says are models of passion, integrity and caring and have great skills in the classroom

For fun: Bike riding, building Lego models, watching independent films and cartoons such as "Spongebob Squarepants" and "Skyland"

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Quote: "It's very, very important to continue to encourage girls and minority students to think about pursuing a career in science, because science needs them very much. We can't afford to miss the perspectives and talents that women and people of color can bring."