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IWU Biology Major Catches a Wave - and the Plankton Inside

July 8, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - Amy Slott of Oswego, Ill., a junior biology major at Illinois Wesleyan University, spent June 1-11 aboard the R/V (Research Vessel) New Horizon, a 170 foot-long ship operated by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography of La Jolla, Calif.

Slott, a graduate of Oswego High School, was invited by William Jaeckle, assistant professor of biology, and Elizabeth Balsler, associate professor of biology, to participate in a 10-day research cruise in the San Clemente Basin, 80 miles off the southern coast of California.

The voyage was coordinated by the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution of Fort Pierce, Fla., and led by chief scientist Dr. Tammy Frank. Slott was the youngest of 17 scientists and students from the United States, Great Britain and Germany who were conducting several different projects on board.

Each day, Slott helped Balsler and Jaeckle use a net to collect the microscopic larvae of invertebrates such as sea stars, sea urchins and sea cucumbers. In order to avoid damaging the specimens, the scientists would perform "drift tows," putting the nets out while the ship was drifting, rather than moving forward.

After pulling in the nets, Slott sorted the samples of plankton under a microscope in order to separate the desired larvae from the wide variety of species found in the water. At sea, using a microscope presented an unexpected challenge, Slott said. Due to the rocking of the boat, she had to hold on to the microscope and "chase" the tiny animals that repeatedly sloshed out of her field of vision.

The work was repetitive, Slott admitted, but not boring, as each sample yielded a different variety of animals to observe.

Once the samples were sorted, the researchers performed experiments building on Jaeckle's past work with invertebrate larvae. By submerging the specimens in various chemicals, Slott and Jaeckle observed how the larvae digested and distributed nutrients to their bodies.

Early in the trip, the researchers learned about their own digestive systems as well. "I didn't think I would be sea-sick," Slott said, "but the first day was bad. I was ready to call a helicopter to come and get me off the ship."

Fully recovered by day two of the expedition, Slott went on to catch squid, photograph dolphins, and spot a distant whale. Although the biology major is currently pre-med and plans to take the MCAT (Medical College Admission Test), Slott said that her experience on the ocean enticed her to investigate careers in marine biology as well.

Now back on dry land, Slott will continue her research on the Illinois Wesleyan campus for the rest of the summer by experimenting on specimens transported from California.