

Mad scientist makes no bones about learning

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WASILLA — What do you call a dinosaur who never gives up?

A try, try, triceratops, of course.

“Shimmering” Sharon Sheehan, a Mat-Su Valley “mad scientist,” does more than tell fossilized jokes when she visits classrooms. She shows students that science can be fun and educational.

Students at Shaw Elementary School in Wasilla were treated to hands-on workshops Monday afternoon on all things extinct, including a real fossil dig, bone casting and discussions on how these fascinating reptiles became extinct.

“The kids are really into it,” said Julie Stachowiak, who teaches first and second grades at the school. “The hands-on, interactive learning is really neat for these guys.”

Twenty-five students sat and listened in awe as Sheehan pulled replicas of dinosaur bones and teeth from her Mad Science bag, talking about how meat-eaters and omnivores cohabited more than 160 million years ago.

“Who knows who these teeth belong too?” Sheehan asked, holding a knife-like *Tyrannosaurus rex* tooth.

“A T-rex!” yelled Sam Burke, a 7-year-old in Stachowiak’s class. “They went extinct, so we don’t actually get to see them.”

Angela Blake, a kindergarten teacher at Shaw, heard about the Mad-Science program through the Mat-Su School District and contacted chief scientist for Mad Science of South Central Alaska, Jeff Mitchell, who introduced the interactive science workshops to the Mat-Su Valley.

Mad Science is the world's leading fun science provider for birthday parties, after-school programs, in-school workshops, camps, assemblies and corporate events. Mitchell and his mad scientists set up mini-labs of entertainment at schools, the Boys and Girls Club in



ROBERT DeBERRY/Frontiersman Jessica Cuculla, 8, left, and Torrey Zook inspect a dinosaur bone during a hands-on workshop Monday afternoon at Shaw Elementary School. The girls learned about all things extinct, including a fossil dig, bone casting and discussions on how dinosaurs became extinct.

Wasilla, parties, and other venues so children can experience unique, hands-on science activities that spark their imaginative learning.

“So now we go to the schools, present workshops, summer camps, weddings, funerals, any place you need a kid to get an education and have a good time,” he said. “We can do just about any kind of event.”

Blake said she was excited to learn about Mad Science reaching Alaska, hoping Shaw Elementary students could benefit from its unique teaching techniques.

“We’ve been doing hands-on learning for a while, but not on this scale,” Blake said. “The enthusiasm level is off the charts with the kids. Whenever we can get programs in the community like this it is great.”

In early spring, Mitchell signed on four more freelance scientists, including Sheehan, to begin teaching hands-on science projects in classrooms.

“I found the job on Craigslist, actually,” Sheehan admitted. “I love teaching with the Mad Science program, and obviously the kids enjoy it as well.”

Sheehan has taught science in classrooms before, but not on the scale Mad Science offers. Upon hearing she would be presenting dinosaur experiments at Shaw, Sheehan sent each teacher activities for their students to do beforehand to prepare for the show.

Wearing a long, white lab coat, Sheehan presented tubs of dirt as students partnered with each other to discover what lurked within. One by one, students dug and picked at the moist soil, uncovering miniature dinosaur ribs, pelvic girdles, arms, legs, feet and long tails.

“I found the rest of the skull!” said Aiden Cole, a first-grader at Shaw, as he pulled a tiny, plastic jawbone from the tub of soil.

Learning how an excavator works, students prodded with their spoons and dusted the bones off with paintbrushes, helping each other identify each bone as they tried to piece the dinosaurs back together.

“My favorite is definitely the T-rex,” Cole said. “But if I got to pick another one, it’d be the pterodactyl.”

At the end of the session, students made plaster-of-Paris casts of the T-rex bone replicas to take home. As students poured the white goop into small cups of dirt, Sheehan’s science jokes drew little reaction, landing a few laughs from the teachers in the classroom.

“What do you call a dinosaur that smashed everything in its path?” Sheehan asked. “A tyrannosaurus wrecks.”

To learn more about Mad Science, visit Madscience.org/scalaska.