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Meet our Polar Bear Ambassador: She's 16 and has already braved the Arctic

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It's been just a week since Westport's Katya Strage returned from her inaugural trip to the Arctic as Connecticut's first Polar Bear Ambassador. Enough time to turn off the lights, dial down the thermostat and show up at field hockey practice with reusable water bottles made from recycled materials.

"I am driving my sister nuts, yelling at her to turn off lights," Strage admits. "But I've really come to believe that there are little things we can do that really do mean a lot to the polar bears."

Nudging her family to cut their energy consumption to reduce their carbon footprint is just one of them.

Strage, 16, a junior at Staples High School, is the state's official Polar Bear Ambassador, a distinction held by just 32 teens from four countries whose role it is to educate the public on the plight of the endangered mammal. Polar Bear Ambassadors are trained by the Canadian-based philanthropy Polar Bears International to raise awareness in their communities of the plight of the bears and the dangers of global warming.

The teen, who aspires to be a doctor, was chosen from a field of six high school finalists in a competition sponsored earlier this year by Westport-based Gault Inc., a home heating company. She is the only Polar Bear Ambassador from Connecticut and the only one sponsored by a home heating company, says Sam Gault, the company's president.

"What impressed us about Katya goes beyond her being bright and articulate," says Gault. "All of her concern



was centered around others. She had a very strong sense that this was a global problem. We thought she could make the best case for what the polar bear means and why we should care." While it might be ironic for a company that profits from selling fossil fuel to form an alliance with a philanthropy committed to saving polar bears, Gault says it makes sense to promote conservation. To that end, the company has formed a 10-year alliance with Polar Bear International. Strage is the first Polar Bear Ambassador from Fairfield County, but there will be at least nine more. "We see conservation as the future. And we see the need to find alternative fuel sources as the future," Gault says. "From that perspective, it makes perfect sense."

By making a case for polar bears - an endangered species in the United States - Strage hopes to personalize the perils of global warming. "I know for some people it's controversial, but I don't know how you can argue with science. I think it is naive to say they are not threatened," she says. "The polar bears are in danger and these animals really symbolize what is happening to our earth."

Strage recently completed a week of leadership camp sponsored by the environmental philanthropy Polar

Bears International in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. There, Strage bunked with 16 American teenagers in a remote camp in the Canadian tundra where it was not unusual to wake up and find a polar bear sleeping near her cabin. While touring the tundra in a buggy, she also came close to a mother and two cubs. "I saw 10 bears during the time I was there. Being in a place where I was so close to their homes really made this much more personal for me," says Strage.

Besides her close encounters with bears, Strage says she was deeply impressed by seminars she attended on global warming. In one, her group studied time-elapsed pictures of a piece of arctic icecap dating back to the 1980s. "Between 1980 and 2000 it was diminished, you could tell it was smaller, but not significantly. Between 2000 and 2008, the changes were dramatic," Strage says. Because polar bears use the ice as a launching pad for fishing, their sustenance, "the impacts for them are obvious."

Strage also met with trappers, scientists, experts on public speaking and zookeepers. The process taught her a bit about gathering information and not judging situations without careful study.

"I used to think, for example, that zoos were kind of exploitive," she says. "But I came away realizing that most polar bears in zoos are there because they were injured, they can't live in the wild. And the most persuasive and passionate advocates for protecting them were the zoo people."

During her week in Canada, Strage developed an action-plan for campaigning for polar bear preservation at home. Her specific plans are still tentative, but they include visits to elementary schools throughout Fairfield County.

Of course, conservation begins at home. A native of England, she is the daughter of Laura Agostino of Westport and the late David Strage. "No more disposable bottles," says Strage, who estimates just 20 percent of water bottles ever make it to a recycling plant. She and her field hockey teammates are committed to using reusable bottles made from recycled materials. "I tell people, 'Bring your own cup to Starbuck's or Dunkin Donuts.' 'Ride your bike more.' 'Car pool more.' 'Take public transportation whenever you can.'"

She's also switching, whenever possible, to writing on recycled paper made from trees cut in sustainable forests. She's big on turning down the thermostat and unplugging her computer when it's not in use. "I think if I work with young kids, they can go home and have an influence on their families," she says. "But I am seriously driving my sister nuts. She says I turn off so many lights she can't see anything."

Says Gault: "Katya is right. If everyone just turned down their thermostat one degree, it would make a difference. Katya gets that and we think she's going to be a wonderful advocate by getting that message out."

Applications for the 2009 Polar Bear Ambassador program will be available early next year. An exact date was not available at press time. Visit www.gault-pbi.com for more information.

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