

Saving Polar Bears

Staples High Junior Named Arctic Ambassador

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Staples High School junior Katya Strage, 16, has been selected to become Fairfield County's first Arctic Ambassador, where she will join 14 students from across the world at Polar Bears International's (PBI) Leadership Camp in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada from Oct. 9 to 16.

"I'm so enthusiastic about going," said Strage. "I know it's a big role to fill."

Strage became an Arctic Ambassador after winning the PBI Leadership Competition, sponsored by the Gault-PBI Alliance, which was formed this spring.

Gault Inc. is more than just an energy supplier, teaming up with PBI and creating a 10-year alliance. Gault began the first grassroots energy conservation movement of its kind in Fairfield County. Sam Gault, president of Gault Inc., said the Gault-PBI Alliance's mission is "to make residents of Fairfield County more aware of their energy use."

"If we can educate them to use less energy, it will benefit the polar bear — less is more," said Gault. "Everyone can relate to the polar bear. It's a symbolic figure for global warming."

Gault said hearing of a story about a little girl asking her parents to turn down the thermostat one degree to help save polar bears, inspired him to want to help. So, he did research on polar bears and looked at various organizations to see what they were all about, but decided on PBI.

"The more we learned, the more we became impressed with PBI," said Gault. "They're focused on education and they're research-driven."

Gault contacted PBI and met with PBI President Robert Buchanan. Gault said he was inspired by Buchanan and what his organization is trying to do.

PBI was founded in 1992 and it is an all-volunteer nonprofit organization. Its goal is

to save the polar bears environment by raising awareness of the effects global warming has on not only the polar bears' habitat, but also on the planet. According to a press release from PBI and Gault Inc., PBI is "dedicated to preserving the polar bear's habitat through conservation, research and education."

One way PBI raises awareness and educates is through its four-year-old Leadership Camp. PBI's Leadership Camp is offered to select students worldwide from four different countries.

Strage will be joining other students from around the world who have also been chosen as Arctic Ambassadors. She said that through the online social network Facebook she has talked to other Arctic Ambassadors who will be in her group, ranging from all over the world, from San Diego, Calif., to Denmark, Canada and Australia.

Becoming an Arctic Ambassador has many responsibilities. Students who partici-

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pate in the week long Leadership Camp collect data and investigate issues that affect not only polar bears, but humans and the environment as well. They work alongside scientists, teachers, filmmakers and photographers studying polar bears in their natural habitat. Students will also learn how climate change is causing sea ice to melt at an accelerated rate, which is affecting the planet, polar bears and other animals.

In order to apply for the Arctic Ambassador role, Strage had to fill out an application and write an essay on why she would be the best PBI Arctic Ambassador for Gault Inc. and Fairfield County. Students also have to be entering the 11th grade by the fall and be 16-years-old. Semi-finalists are then called for interviews with the



five-person Gault-PBI Alliance Selection Committee.

John Horkel, executive director of Westport-based Earthplace, The Nature Discovery, was one of the committee members.

"I was impressed by all of these young people," Horkel said. "The future is in their hands. I think we picked the best one."

When deciding who was going to become an Arctic Ambassador, Horkel said the committee looked for someone who "understood the duties" and who had leadership qualities and presence. Horkel said his decision to choose Strage was because of her involvement with Builders Beyond Borders (B3), her "need to empower others to be involved with the environment," and the fact that she "looked you in the eye" and "answered questions directly."

"I was so shocked. I was like really?" Strage said. "I was so happy. I went online and did research."

Strage is no stranger to traveling across the world. She was born in England, then moved to Switzerland when she was two, then moved back to England when she was four, and moved to Westport in the eight grade. She also is involved with B3, which is a nonprofit organization that allows high school students to participate in construction projects in poverty-stricken areas throughout the world.

"I think I started finding my passion starting B3 and helping people," said Strage. "Obviously global warming is a huge issue...I'm going to have to apply everything I learned from my experience with B3."

While in Canada, Strage will blog daily about her experiences and the types of things she is doing with her classmates. She will also

have the chance to speak with Staples High School's student body through a live satellite feed from the tundra. Strage hopes that her classmates seeing her there will inspire them to want to go there or help out in other ways.

"It's such an important issue," she said.

John Dodig, Staples High School principal, also hopes the live satellite feed from Canada will inspire others to help.

"That's the motivation — any exposure we can give kids, because you never know what will inspire kids," he said. "Talking about what she's doing, it absolutely could support it. I support it."

PBI's Leadership Camps are used to educate and encourage students to return home to their communities and bring about change. When Strage returns, she will begin a campaign that will educate her peers and younger children about conservation issues.

"Coming home from Canada I will go to grammar schools and different schools to educate people about global warming and how it's affecting the polar bear, and reducing the carbon footprint," said Strage.

According to a press release from PBI and Gault Inc., "Scientists predict that global warming may render the arctic inhabitable for polar bears by as soon as the year 2030." In Canada and Russia, the polar bear is listed as "a species of concern" due to the decreasing sea ice. According to PBI's Web site, as of May this year, The U.S. Department of the Interior declared that the polar bear has been listed as a Threatened Species under the Endangered Species Act.

For information, visit www.polarbearsinternational.org



Jenna Gaillard / Staff reporter

Staples High School junior Katya Strage will be heading north to Manitoba, Ontario, Oct. 9 as Fairfield County's first Arctic Ambassador.

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