



Barefoot Memories: My Summer as a Ranger



The two things I could always count on during the Sunset Strolls I led last summer at White Sands National Monument were a vibrant sunset and blank looks from the group when I introduced myself as a Teacher-Ranger-Teacher (TRT). “A what?” I would then explain that most of the year I taught 3rd graders in a school just outside Washington, DC, but that during this summer I was a park ranger at White Sands.

Visitors expected that my challenges would include the change in climate and the lack of frenzied activity. Neither of those were a problem—in fact, they were a welcome relief! The biggest challenge I faced was figuring out how to convey to my students back in Silver Spring, Maryland what a unique and utterly amazing place White Sands National Monument is—especially since they may never get the chance to walk barefoot in the sand while sledding in the heart of the dunes on a sizzling hot day.

The TRT program was set up to create ambassadors between the National Park System and Title 1 (high poverty) schools. The people who established this program were wise in realizing that teachers are a natural way to create supporters among the younger generation. My school has a very high poverty rate and a primarily immigrant population. Both of those factors mean that the children at my school probably would not grow up with warm memories of visiting our collectively-owned national treasures that are our national park.

In addition to learning a lot about the park in eight short weeks, I got some ideas from other NPS sites about what programs each park provides for teachers. I left with the idea of being part of establishing a *Ranger in the Dunes* program that could be established with computer or video phone connections between White Sands and distant schools. The NPS calls it “distance learning.” I call it a great way for students to make personal connections to parks and park rangers.

Since returning to Maryland, I have taught mostly 3rd but some 4th graders about different national parks. On the first day of my biweekly class, I asked for the students to tell me what they already know about national parks. The responses included: they have great rides and food, and they have good playground stuff. Four months later, my students can talk all about sled dogs in Denali, bats at Carlsbad, geothermal features at Yellowstone, and how canal locks work at the C&O Canal. They will learn about White Sands in future

weeks, and, with any luck, they will get to meet a ranger in the White Sands dunes and ask her or him lots of questions. I predict that they will love it!

—Gail Melson, Teacher-Ranger-Teacher



TRT Gail Melson