

Young drillers sink pipe to find the oil, uh, chocolate

By Tim Bradner

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The drillers surveyed the terrain. That rise, did it indicate an underground anticline? Could there be oil trapped in the bend of those rocks?

Only one way to find out. Drill.

Down went the drill pipe. First test brought up only the vanilla. Ditto the second test.

Third test, up came chocolate. Bingo! Smiles all around.

In this exploration project, unlike real life, the unsuccessful drillers got to share in the cake.

This was Mike Warren's science class from Central Middle School of Science in Anchorage. The 18 eighth-graders were busy drilling into cakes prepared by the Petroleum Club in the Calais II building in midtown Anchorage.

Chefs at the club made each of the five cakes differently, so the terrain, with simulated hills, trees, lakes and streams, were all different and the layers of "oil" (the chocolate) placed differently.

After listening to briefing sessions on petroleum basics, the students had to examine the cake and figure out where the oil might be. The drill pipes were straws, and what the straws extracted was pretty yummy, no matter what came up.

Warren's class was in a year-long program in geo-spatial technology that included studies of geographic information systems and remote sensing, but he needed a unit on natural resource industry basics. He found Alaska Resource Education, a nonprofit that provides assistance to teachers (and conducts classes for teachers) in Alaska's land-based resource industries, mainly oil and gas, mining and forestry.

"What they had was a perfect fit for what these students needed," Warren said.

Alaska Resource Education, which is staffed by Michelle Brunner and Beth Klein, teamed up with the Petroleum Club, a member-only dining and meeting center, to offer a day-long program in petroleum industry basics.

Eric Dompeling, with Baker Hughes, and who is president of the Petroleum Club board this year, was only too happy to help organize the event and make the club's facilities, and chefs, available.

"Education about our industry is part of our mission and we've been looking for a way to do it, so this was natural," Dompeling said.

Brunner and Klein lined up a list of industry heavy-hitters for the briefing sessions, starting out with veteran drillers and technical professionals – Rick Fox and Les Skinner of Shell, as well as Dompeling – talking about their careers and went on to the basics of drilling and petroleum production.

The cake exercise followed lunch, and the day ended with a panel of industry professionals that included the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission's Cathy Foerster, BP drilling engineer Adrienne McVey, Norcon Inc.'s Brian Charboneau and Shell public affairs manager Curtis Smith, as well as the chocolate



Central Middle School of Science students, from left, Conference Fagafaga, Gage Dabin and Gage Cederberg, analyze drilling prospects. Beth Klein, of the Alaska Resource Education, offers help. *Photo/Tim Bradner/AJOC*

man himself, Lance Webb, head chef of the Petroleum Club.

Industry people are happy to participate in events like this because exposing talented young people to information about the industry can stimulate their interest and encourage them to pursue higher level science and math, and possibly consider the petroleum or some other resource industry for a career.

Alaska Resource Education is the rebranded AMEREF (Alaska Mineral and Energy Resource Education Fund), a long-established resource education program organized originally through a grant between Alaska Miners Association, state Department of Education and Early Development and the state Division of Economic Development.

AMEREF specialized mainly in providing resource education kits to teachers in science classes around the state who wanted more materials and curricula. About 300 resource kits, which are packed with materials including a 40-piece rock and minerals set, are distributed to classrooms each year, Brunner said. Each kit costs about \$400. Money for the kits is raised mostly from private donations.

The program was started in 1984 at the instigation of the late Sen. Bettye Fahrenkamp of Fairbanks, who was interested in resources industries and concerned that schools lacked comprehensive curriculums that explain how these industries support the state's economy.

"The program was administered by the Resource Development Council but was worked directly through the Alaska Department of Education," Brunner said. "This allowed the partnership of industry and education to establish lines of communication and existing lines of organizational structure for statewide acceptance of the program."

When Brunner took over last year as full-time executive director, "our first step was to realign the organization to better meet their mission and the needs of educators and students," she said.

She accomplished this by rebranding the organization to Alaska Resource Education, moving the facility into its own space and hiring an education director, Beth Klein.

The content of the program is expanding, too. The first day-long "Energy Einsteins" session for students was on the petroleum industry, Brunner said, but two sessions for students set for the fall will focus, first, on the Alaska Permanent Fund, as a framework for discussing state fiscal policy, and secondly on the electric utility industry.

State oil royalties provided the original foundation of the permanent fund, and too many Alaska young people don't know that, Brunner said. As for the utilities, natural gas fuels the bulk of power generation for Southcentral Alaska, so young people need to know where their electricity ultimately comes from.

Klein is the education director and point person for dealing with teachers and schools. "She's in an average of one classroom a day," talking to students about resource industries.

One thing Brunner and Klein have resurrected is a 15-hour teachers' course given periodically through the year that teaches, among other things, how to use materials in the education kit.

The courses are given under auspices of the University of Alaska and are held in different parts of the state depending on demand. Teachers taking the course earn credits toward their required re-certifications and knowledge about Alaska's resources and the important role they play in the state of Alaska.