

"LIVING WITH THE PENGUINS IN ANTARCTICA"

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Tom Vartabedian, Haverhill MA, 13 October 2015

For Dr. Deneb Karentz, it's just another day on the job --- in Antarctica. The 63-year-old has been traveling to this continent as a researcher and educator for three decades. When the University of San Francisco biology professor returns there each December, she visits Lake Karentz, a 1.3-mile permanently frozen body of water dedicated to her by the United States Board on Geographic Names. Log onto [Lake Karentz](#) and you'll see amazing pictures.

"It was something I never expected," she said. "I thought it was a joke when I first heard about it. I'm obviously quite thrilled and honored."

Dr. Karentz is quick to note her proud Armenian-American lineage which follows anything in the "IAN" and "YAN" vanguard. Her first name is after the star Deneb --- a very bright star in the Summer Triangle.

"That was my father's idea," she notes. "He was interested in celestial navigation in the Navy when I was born. Deneb is part of the constellation Cygnus/Northern Cross."

Dr. Karentz became involved in Antarctic research in 1986 through a chance meeting with fellow University of Rhode Island graduate Richard Rivkin. A program had developed researching the physiology of phytoplankton in Antarctica and a field team was being pieced together.

"That year we went down was the first time the United States sent a team of atmospheric scientists to look at ozone depletion," Dr. Karentz recalled. "The National Science Foundation decided to fund biological research the following year so I was in the right place at the right time to initiate a new project."

While still doing research, she goes back year after year as an educator, bringing polar scientists to Antarctica. Her research focuses on the ultraviolet photobiology of marine organisms, identifying strategies for protection from UV exposure.

It's no easy task getting there. To reach her destination at McMurdo Station, Dr. Karentz flies to New Zealand. Then, she boards a military cargo plane for eight hours. Getting to the Antarctic Peninsula requires yet another flight to Tierra del Fuego, the Southern-most tip of South America, followed by a five-day trip aboard an icebreaker ship to an almost other-worldly spot.

"It's just a beautiful place to be with fantastic landscapes," she describes. "There's nowhere else like it on Earth. It's incredible."

While most people would shun such a mission, Dr. Karentz feels privileged to be there, experiencing life in such a remote place, far removed from ordinary civilization.

Deneb grew up in Jamestown, RI, daughter of Rose and Varoujan Karentz, turning to athletics in high

school as a 2-sport captain to complement a proud academic standing.

She's been a Californian since 1983, serving on the School Board for Krouzian-Zekarian-Vasbouragan (KZV) Armenian School. She's also active on the Bay Area Support Committee for Armenia's Cosmic Ray Division, a local group that raises funds for research on cosmic rays at the Alikhanian Physics Institute in Armenia.

She recalls her early years as a lifeguard at Camp Hayastan and active in her church and the AYF, coming from a family deeply entrenched in Armenian affairs, including the formation of the Armenian National Committee for Homeless Armenians (ANCHA).

Over the past 30 years, she's made the trip to Antarctica no fewer than 20 times. On one occasion, she found the South Pole quite exciting. It's a place where she feels totally immersed in the natural environment. How large is the risk?

"The key to survival is dressing properly to work outside," she says. "Safety is key, where you go to avoid dangers of thin ice, crevasses, and survival if stranded in the field. As to the penguins, you wouldn't call them gentle. They are entertaining and fun to watch, extremely cute, but can be very aggressive, loud and smelly. Every trip I make turns into an adventure."

About 75 percent of the staff are support staff, not scientists. There are social spaces to congregate for games. Some people do crafting. Others have musical instruments at the station. Outdoor activities such as cross country skiing and hiking are popular.

Dr. Karentz is a professor of Biology and Environmental Science at the University of San Francisco. She attended the University of Rhode Island (URI) as an undergraduate and obtained her doctoral degree from the URI Graduate School of Oceanography. In between came a master's degree from Oregon State University.

A 2-year sabbatical was spent in Washington, DC, as assistant program director of Arctic programs. Her Antarctica projects are funded by the Division of Polar Programs at the National Science Foundation.

At the university, she also teaches a graduate course in climate change, along with undergraduate courses in oceanography and evolution. One aspect of her work is to mentor early career scientists.

As far as maintaining her Armenian heritage, that would be a given attribute. Deneb has no intention to ever become assimilated. It was the biggest part of her childhood and not something she would lose arbitrarily.

"I don't think I could ever separate my heritage or my AYF experiences," she maintains. "My parents and grandparents have been very big influences in my life and 50 years later, I am still very emotionally attached to my culture and identity. It is not something I shall ever lose --- no matter where I might dwell."

"My Favorite Things"

Armenian book: Favorite recipes of the Cilician Armenian Memorial Church, Ladies Aid Society, Watertown

Film: The Harry Potter series

Music: Old-time rock & roll

Vacation spot: Rhode Island, where I spend my summers at the coast

Athletic team: Toss-up between the Boston Red Sox and San Francisco Giants

Pet peeve: Misuse of apostrophes

Junk food: Twizzlers

Proudest accomplishment: Having a lake named after me, honoring my work in Antarctica as a scientist

Most embarrassing moment: Not remembering someone's name

Form of relaxation: Baking and playing soccer

Quote: "Enjoy life --- this is not a rehearsal!"

