

Contest winners are full of questions 'Ask a Biologist' podcasts stimulate students

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Editor's note: This article was submitted by Margaret Coulombe, media relations coordinator for ASU School of Life Sciences. Send your education news to lori.baker@arizonarepublic .com.

Arizona State University doctoral student Rebecca Clark bends the neck of a flexible lamp to illuminate a wide plain of dirt captured between two panes of glass.

Three Phoenix elementary students peer closely to see that the soil has been organized into a branching array of chambers by some very busy leaf-cutter ants. advertisement

Around them, on every available surface, are experimental setups containing colonies of leaf-cutters and sap-sippers; bigheaded ants and night ants. Of special interest: predatory jumping ants from India.

The barrage of questions from the trio of young students start: "Are all ants female? Is that a garbage dump? What is that fuzzy stuff?"

"This is so much fun." Clark beams. "I love the questions."

The inquisitors are third-graders Taylor Cheatham and Itzany Mendez, and fifth-grader Brian Varela from Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School.

That these students are both curious and articulate comes as no surprise to the accompanying adults and the host of this excursion, Charles Kazilek. The three are the winners of the first "Ask a Biologist" podcast contest, and they were chosen based on their vocal skills, curiosity and creativity by the panel of judges.

Questions are the lifeblood of Kazilek. As director of technology integration and outreach in the ASU School of Life Sciences, he created "Ask a Biologist," the innovative K-12 children's science education Web site, to provide answers to the puzzled, perplexed and just plain curious. As its host Dr. Biology, a Web persona created by Kazilek, he has interpreted more than 20,000 queries in the last 10 years - with help from the more than 350 faculty and graduate student volunteers to call upon.



Third-grader Itzany Mendez, one of the three winners of the "Ask a Biologist" podcast contest, conducts an interview at Arizona State University (photo: Jacob Mayfield)

In 2007, Kazilek took a technological leap, and added podcasts. Twice monthly, children, adults, home-schoolers and teachers can download the sounds of the Tibetan plateau or drop into a conversation with a Pulitzer Prize winning ant adventurer.

However, according to Kazilek, one voice was missing, "the children themselves." Hence, the podcast contest and search for child co-hosts was born.

"This is such a wonderful opportunity," says Helen Rentz, a third-grade teacher at Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School. "The children have never had anything like this available to them before. They were very motivated to research, to interview, to podcast, and it's the first trip for them and their families to ASU."

"This has definitely made an impact," adds Joan Howell, teacher with the Accelerated Learning Procedures (ALPS) program in Phoenix in which all three students participate.

Taylor, Itzany and Brian are the first three of 12 students who will be featured on Ask a Biologist each year.

To become a podcast co-host, each student did a podcast interview and submitted a CD, much like a podcast version of "American Idol," with support from their teachers. As winners, and as Kazilek's co-hosts, they came to his Grassroots Studio, interviewed a scientist, and recorded a professional quality podcast. They also received one of the tools of their trade - an Apple iPod Shuffle.

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