Profile of Dr. Kari van Zee

Laboratory research is not the only path you can follow once you’ve earned a PhD in science, as demonstrated by Dr. Kari van Zee of Corvallis, Oregon. Van Zee has always loved science, especially cells. “I am always amazed at what a beautiful molecule DNA is and how much information is contained in its chemical structure,” she says. But rather than study those cells at a lab bench, she chose to find a way to help teachers instill that love of cells, and all science, in their own students.

For the past ten years, van Zee has been involved in a biotechnology outreach program for high school students and teachers. She develops and teaches workshops for high school science teachers, introducing them to DNA and advances in biotechnology. She also has a set of molecular biology lab equipment that she makes available to classrooms throughout Oregon, so teachers and students can perform some basic molecular biology experiments. Her outreach work is coordinated through the Science Education Partnerships (SEPS) program at Oregon State University.

Van Zee has understood the value of good science teaching since she herself was a student. She was originally inspired to be a scientist by her high school biology and chemistry teachers. As she continued down the road to becoming a scientist, her senior adviser at Princeton University (where she got her undergraduate degree) and her PhD adviser at the Ludwigs Maximillians University in Munich, Germany, were her role models and supporters.

The outreach program that van Zee operates reaches 15 to 20 teachers and more than 500 students every year. By teaching teachers the most current science and giving them the tools to convey that information to their students, she is ensuring that the excitement she felt about science as a student will occur in the next generation of scientists.

To students who are interested in science or science education as a career, van Zee offers this advice: “To find out if you are interested in working with a certain professor or in a certain field, take the time to read about that field first. Set up internships starting in high school, even if you don’t get paid for the work. In college, coming in with some training will help you get a position in a lab. Before you start on a PhD project, make sure that the lab is an exciting and supportive place to work and that the researchers are really interested in working with students. Explore opportunities of working overseas in other research labs.”

When she’s not teaching teachers, van Zee can be found spending time with her two children or playing. She enjoys hiking, backpacking, bike touring, and gardening.