

Dinosaur livens up geology class

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Some Elon students had a Jurassic encounter earlier this summer when their Intro to Geology instructor decided that he needed to "step out of the box" and bring the subject to life.

Adjunct physics professor Sankey Blanton is animated about science. He got his degree in oceanography from UNC-Chapel Hill and is still living in that area, "waiting for the ice caps to melt" so he can practice his true calling. But for now, he teaches physics and geology at Elon.

Geology, study of the physical history of the planet, has its roots deep in the study of ancient life, something Blanton considers vitally important to understanding the science. But how to get a summer session class just as excited about it in only 21 days?

"The same way you do it with a 3-year-old," he said. "Dinosaurs."

They built their own dinosaur: a pterodactyl with a 5-meter wingspan.

Blanton said the students rolled their eyes at first, but they "got into reading the book and watching the videos, and (the pterodactyl) brought it all together."

He took his son's old wooden model of the dinosaur, took it apart and made photocopies of each piece.

He blew the pictures up to 400 percent of their original size, and the class used that as a guide.

The 15 students gathered cardboard throughout the summer session and glued pieces together to form four-ply pieces.

"Everything is intended to be lightweight and recyclable," Blanton said. They had to incorporate two pieces of wood to strengthen the shoulders and backbone of the model so it could hang from the ceiling.

The model took about a week to build, and was almost sabotaged when Blanton left the pieces of cardboard on the floor of his classroom, and the cleaning crew thought they were trash. Luckily, the pieces were recovered.

The pterodactyl is half the size of what a real pterodactyl would have been.

The model will soon be moved to Hillcrest Elementary School in Burlington, already home to an iguana and a stuffed black bear.

"I was the only fool that called (Blanton) back," joked principal Robin Woody.

"I'm an old science teacher, so I said, 'It'll be something for the kids to talk about.'"

Before the pterodactyl can move to the school, and possibly be named in a contest by the students, it must be covered in a flame retardant.

"Dinosaurs are only symbolic of life on Earth," Blanton said. "We also covered the dynamic planet, plate tectonics, life on earth and hydrology."

Everyone in the class earned their Basic Hydrological Science Distance Learning Course certificate from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which uses it to train weather forecasters how to do hydrological forecasts.

Blanton thought this was important not only because hydrology is a vital aspect of geology, but also because "we're in the middle of a drought, and the Midwest is having the greatest floods it's ever

had."

Blanton is now teaching astronomy, but he said there won't be a similar project.

"This class only has 15 days. It's real hard to build a rocket ship in 15 days," he said.

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