

ONE-ON-ONE WITH SANDRA LEBRÓN GARCÍA U-T PRO...

By Story by Deborah Sullivan-Brennan and Photography by Howard Lipin | midnight Jan. 9, 2016 | Updated , 8:05 a.m.

Sandra Lebrón García spent most of her life surrounded by water, in her homeland in Puerto Rico. Now, the Alpine resident spends her days educating kids about water for San Diego Coastkeeper.

Garcia earned her bachelor's degree in biology with a major in coastal marine biology, and then earned a master's in marine science, both in Puerto Rico.

In 2002, Lebrón García, 37, began working as an education specialist, visiting schools to teach children about Puerto Rico's marine ecosystems, marine debris and endangered species. She organized workshops to help teachers introduce ocean science into classes for kindergarten through high school. She then moved to a full-time position as an education coordinator for the Jobos Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, a tropical Puerto Rican reserve dotted with seagrass beds, coral reefs and mangroves.

"Both experiences helped me to see the need to help teachers integrate a multidisciplinary approach on science education," she said.

In 2011, Lebrón García moved with her husband to San Diego for her husband's job, and went to work with Coastkeeper, teaching kids about the region's water and helping teachers incorporate marine science into their classrooms.

Q: Please describe what you do.

A: I am San Diego Coastkeeper's education coordinator. I oversee all components of San Diego Coastkeeper's education program, including curriculum development, teacher professional development, presentations for schools and extracurricular programs. We offer free environmental science curriculum designed to build a generation of San Diego stewards and leaders who love and respect water and our local ecosystems.

Q: What is the most important thing children should know about our water supply?

A: That our water is a very scarce resource, and we import 85 percent of our drinking water, which means we should use our water wisely. Water conservation should be part of our lifestyle.

Q: How do you communicate the role of a watershed to school children?

A: Our lesson about watershed is inquiry, hands-on, interactive and student-centered - not a lecture. We build a watershed model where they can see and touch all the components of the watershed, including human activities and ecosystems. They can see how water interconnects all by "making it rain in a watershed." They can also see how our activities can cause pollution runoff such as trash, car oil and dog poop. And also they can think about their daily activities and how we can help prevent pollution by changing some of our actions.

Q: What is your favorite part of the lessons you teach?

A: Getting hands-on with water and pollution, and definitely the kids' questions and ideas to help our water. This always makes us feel that our job has an impact on changing attitudes toward the environment.

Q: Coming from Puerto Rico, what is different and similar about science education in America?

A: Science education in Puerto Rico is very similar to the U.S. Since Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, teachers need to comply with very similar regulations. They teach a curriculum aligned to similar state standards, all the core science subjects are taught in the public and private systems. The students have science classes in grades K-12. Another similarity is that teachers from Puerto Rico and the U.S., after participating in environmental science workshops or presentations, see how environmental education can support science, literacy, math, etc.

Q: How do kids respond to lessons on water conservation?

A: They feel surprised about the many gallons of water that we use for our daily activities. They understand that we need to conserve water when they learn that only 15 percent of our water is from local sources. Then they feel empowered; they want to take action and tell their families how they can save water and money just by changing some habits.

Q: How do you adjust the subject matter for different grade levels?

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A: We follow the Next Generation Science Standards and Common Core State Standards. Each grade level has specific student performance expectations that help students build upon grade levels. We allowed students to ask questions and we try to clear up any misconceptions by using inquiry teaching methods.

Q: What would you tell a student who is interested in a career in science?

A: That they can do whatever they want to do, that scientists use different skills and science is multidisciplinary and can help people and the environment in many ways.

Q: What are the top three things San Diegans should know about our water?

A: San Diego local water is very limited. Conservation is easy and saves money, too. Our landscape can be beautiful with drought-tolerant plants.

Q: What's the best advice you ever received?

A: If you don't know the answer to a question, don't make it up.

Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A: That I lived for 32 years in Puerto Rico, an island, but learned to swim when I was 18 just because I wanted to get my scuba diving certification, which I did a few months later.

Q: Please describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: Hanging out with my husband and our 8-year-old son. Sunny days are for snorkeling or kayaking! Cold days are for hiking in Cuyamaca or any other pretty mountain view! Eating different types of food is a must!

Q: Any last thoughts?

A: Working as the education coordinator for San Diego Coastkeeper has taught me a lot about how a very small group of people can have a huge impact in a community. I feel very inspired to work with this smart and water-loving group of people.

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What I love about Alpine ...

It is a quiet and relaxed small community close to the mountains with beautiful hikes!

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