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Florida full of surprises for GeoFORCE participants

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Awaking at 6 a.m., I fall out of bed and stumble to the kitchen where I microwave some leftovers. After breakfast, I take a quick shower and kiss my mother goodbye. My father drives me to Southwest Texas Junior College, pats me on the back, shakes my hand and leaves. Friends I have not seen for a year get my attention and lead me to the check-in table. My fourth and final summer adventure with GeoFORCE Texas is underway.

Over the past four years, my attitude about GeoFORCE has evolved from the nervous optimism of a soon-to-be high-school student into the excited anticipation of a veteran loading my bags onto a chartered bus and heading off on my final summer academy. The lack of fanfare accompanying my departure a few weeks ago symbolizes the fact that the GeoFORCE program no longer represents a blip on the radar of my summer routine. GeoFORCE has become much more than that. Instead of an anomaly, GeoFORCE has become a treasured part of my life.

Our final trip took us to the Sunshine State, otherwise known as Florida. After a day of air travel, we set up temporary base in Key Largo, one of the islands in the Florida Keys archipelago just off the state's southern tip. Over the next several days, we learned a great deal about coastal geology from our instructors, and soon discovered there is much more geology to Florida than simply meets the eye. For example, did you know the landmass of Florida, as we know it, is actually just the uppermost part of a massive underwater carbonate platform?

For five days we traversed the state, from the southern Keys to the western gulf coast and finally to the eastern Atlantic coast. At John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park we took a glass bottom boat ride and observed a coral reef and the myriad marine life that call the reef home. We also stopped by Windley Key Fossil Reef and had the opportunity to observe an ancient, fossilized reef firsthand.

The next day we traveled through the Florida Everglades and learned how swampy conditions are ideal for the creation of coal. Later in the day we visited Lover's Key on the western coast and recorded the beach's profile, which includes any changes in elevation from the backbeach to the forebeach. Our group's beach profile will be a benchmark for comparison with the profiles of later GeoFORCE groups to chart any and all changes the beach goes through in the coming years.

On the following day, we made a quick visit to The Phosphate Museum in central Florida. Phosphate is the chemical compound of phosphorous, a rare, yet vital element needed to sustain life on Earth, plus oxygen. Florida is a very rich in phosphate, producing 80 percent of the country's supply. About 90 percent of Florida's phosphate is used in fertilizer, but it is also a key ingredient in soft drinks, light bulbs and toothpaste.

Our next stop was Cape Canaveral. We made a trip down to the beach just off the cape on Merritt Island where we were able to witness the Atlantic coast in all its glory. While carefully avoiding marked sea turtle nests, we took a beach profile and dug trenches into the sand to observe the many distinct layers of sediment that make up Merritt Island and all beaches.

That night, our group had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness a loggerhead sea turtle lay her eggs. Around midnight, we trekked back across the beach we had visited earlier in the afternoon. Led by park rangers and volunteer turtle enthusiasts, we witnessed the turtle lay over 100 eggs. We watched her bury the eggs with great care and then got to follow, no more than three feet behind her, as she made her way back into the ocean. It was an utterly breathtaking experience to observe such a majestic creature and for most of our group, myself included, it was the highlight of our trip.

According to our trip agenda, the last day in Florida was supposed to be spent listening to a guest speaker's presentation about remote sensing techniques like radar and sonar. But the GeoFORCE staff had a big surprise for us. As a reward for our attentiveness and general good behavior for the past four summers ☐☐ we were going to be let loose in Disney World's Epcot theme park. What a fantastic surprise!



STUDYING IN THE SAND - Jairo Chavez of Cotulla, Carlos de la Torre of Sabinal and Schaefer Edwards of Uvalde (left to right) work on a beach profile at Lover's Key on the Florida gulf coast during the recent GeoFORCE Texas summer academy.

Arriving back in Uvalde on Friday afternoon, we took a final exam over the material we had covered during our week on the road. The next morning we listened to a presentation by an ExxonMobil representative and then went to the Southwest Texas Junior College campus for a closing ceremony.

Many waxed poetic about the GeoFORCE program, several with tears in their eyes. Lunch was served, skits were performed, program director Julie Spink handed out awards and, just like that, it was time to go home.

In what now seems like the blink of an eye, it was all over, but only in one sense of the word. Sure, the summer academies have ended for my group, but they were never what truly defined the GeoFORCE program. Besides the close friendships GeoFORCE made possible, the program reinforced in me the value of working hard, paying attention and asking lots of questions.

What I have taken away from my GeoFORCE experience is an increased awareness that our planet is a fascinating, complex and beautiful place. I have learned that our Mother Earth has a great deal to teach us, and if we take the time to listen to what she has to say, humanity will surely benefit.

(Editor's note: Schaefer Edwards is one of the Uvalde area members to complete the four-year GeoFORCE summer academy program.)