

# GEOFORCE MONTHLY

Changing lives since 2005



NSF Science Assistants Marissa Vara (left), Glenda Valdez (middle left), Beverly Walker (middle right), and Yuliya Manyakina (right).

## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: MARISSA VARA

Marissa Vara was in the first cohort of GeoFORCE students, partaking in summer academies from 2005 - 2008. Today, she remains a vocal advocate for both GeoFORCE and increasing diversity in the geosciences. As she said, "If it wasn't for GeoFORCE, I wouldn't have been introduced to geology and would definitely never have imagined having a career as a geoscientist."

Vara received her Bachelor of Science in geology from The University of Texas at Austin's Jackson School of Geosciences in 2014. From there, she interned at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and then went on to work on a research cruise in the Scotia Sea where she visited several islands of Antarctica. After two years, she went back to school to get her Masters of Science in paleoclimate geography with a minor in geology at Louisiana State University.

In graduate school, Vara found her passion for geoscience education and outreach. She worked on the GeoFORCE team for a summer, spent eight months as a high school science teacher, and then accepted her current position at the National Science Foundation (NSF) in April 2019.

At NSF, Vara works as a science assistant in the Directorate for Geosciences. Vara's professional and personal experience gives her a unique perspective and personal investment in diversity-related issues in the geoscience workforce. Her position at NSF allows her to develop strategic plans for the GEO Ed group, and give input on solicitations, dear colleague letters, and workshops and talks at numerous science conferences. It's fulfilling work that she feels is making a difference in changing the field of geoscience for the better.

"GeoFORCE changed my life. It gave me the opportunity to widen my view and made me feel like someone from my background could definitely do this science. It means the world to me and is a big part of the reason why I've decided to dedicate my career to giving back."

GeoFORCE Texas is an outreach program through The University of Texas at Austin's Jackson School of Geosciences that introduces high school students from underserved communities to STEM and geoscience careers through summer field experiences, corporate mentoring, and college guidance. In 2015, our program was honored with the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring--the highest such honor from the United States government. More information can be found on our website at <https://www.jsg.utexas.edu/geoforce/>.



Texas Regional Collaboratives coordinator Marsha Willis (left) and Dr. Kathy Ellins (center) discussing geological cores with a teacher (right).

## COVID-19 WELLNESS RESOURCES

- Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Information ([World Health Organization](#))
- How to Stay Physically and Mentally Healthy While COVID-19 Has You Stuck at Home ([TIME](#))
- Tips to Manage Loneliness, Anxiety While Social Distancing During Coronavirus ([Good Morning America](#))
- Tips for Remote Learning or Attending School from Home During the Coronavirus Outbreak ([Apple Insider](#))

## INTERNSHIP & SCHOLARSHIP RESOURCES

- Geoscience Research Programs & Internship Opportunities for Undergrads & Recent Grads
- Scholarships for Undergraduate & Graduate Students
- Scholarships for High School Students

## STAFF SPOTLIGHT: DR. KATHY ELLINS

Educators around the world have worked diligently these past few weeks to transition their classrooms to entirely virtual spaces. In the field of geoscience education, Dr. Kathy Ellins is a leader in the development of both hands-on inquiry activities and eLearning resources for educators and students.

Dr. Ellins is currently the Program Director for Geoscience Education Research at The University of Texas at Austin's Jackson School of Geosciences. She received her master's in science education from New York University and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. She has over 20 years of experience in geoscience education and feels strongly about promoting diversity and inclusion in both K-12 and university classrooms.

Among Dr. Ellins' many accomplishments, she currently serves as the Chair of the Incorporated Research Institutions for Seismology's Education and Public Outreach Standing Committee and she has worked diligently to raise the visibility of the Jackson School of Geosciences within the geoscience education community, receiving over \$4 million in federal, state, and institutional grants to advance the application of geoscience education research and promote diversity and inclusion in the geosciences.

Dr. Ellins was instrumental in developing the current 12th grade GeoFORCE academy trip—a challenge-based learning academy that emphasizes student-centered learning. Now, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Ellins is working with the GeoFORCE team to create virtual academies that will be available to instructors and students worldwide. The GeoFORCE virtual academies will reside within the framework of the NSF-sponsored [DIG Texas Instructional Blueprint](#) project. The project, led by UT Austin, UT El Paso, and Texas A&M University, involved classroom teachers from every corner of Texas. Together, they reviewed thousands of educational resources and curated the best in a collection of various "blueprints" for educators to use. The blueprints offer educators step-by-step instructions for teaching the geosciences.

We encourage students and parents currently searching for online education tools to take advantage of these blueprints. Students interested in the geosciences still have plenty of virtual opportunities to study the Earth and all its many wonders.

# GEOFORCE

TEXAS  
JACKSON SCHOOL OF GEOSCIENCES

@GeoFORCETexas  
 @geoforce\_texas

Questions or comments? Email us at  
[geoforce@jsg.utexas.edu](mailto:geoforce@jsg.utexas.edu)