

MONDAY, JULY 28, 2008

SECTION
B

The Bakersfield Californian

OPINION, B3

KHSD board member Chad Vegas explains what his oath means

LOCAL

REAL PEOPLE

Bakersfield grad rocks on

BY JENNY SHEARER

Californian staff writer
e-mail: jshearer@bakersfield.com

Geologic research will soon take Katie O'Sullivan to Iceland, and it may help her reach space one day.

When O'Sullivan was 10 or 11 years old, she wrote a letter outlining her goals: to marry, have two kids and work for NASA, said her proud mom, Janet Nelson.

Nelson encouraged her daughter to do whatever she wanted, and O'Sullivan took that to heart.

Katie O'Sullivan holds a famous meteorite, ALH84001, at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston. This is a Martian meteorite that was responsible for the "Life on Mars" uproar a few years back, O'Sullivan said. Scientists believed they had found bacteria within this meteorite.

O'SULLIVAN: Working for NASA has been an 'obsession'

Continued from B1

"It's been her obsession" to work for NASA, Nelson said. And once O'Sullivan took geology classes at Cal State, "it really all kind of hit home."

The 24-year-old Cal State Bakersfield alumna has applied to be an astronaut. She's interning at NASA's Lunar Planetary Institute in Houston this summer, studying moon rocks and helping plot locations for future manned or robotic landings.

Moon rocks tell scientists about how the Earth was formed, said Rob Negrini, CSUB professor of geology and physics.

He recalls O'Sullivan as an enthusiastic and directed student, someone who had a "good sense of what was important."

Her mom pushed her to go to college, even though money was tight.

"Money should never be an issue whether you go to college or not," O'Sullivan said.

Many geology majors typically pursue careers with oil or water resource companies, not academia.

But O'Sullivan left a lucrative position at Occidental Petroleum Corp. to follow her passion for research. She applied to top-notch schools and earned a full scholarship to graduate school at the University of Notre Dame.

"I thought it would be better for

me to do something that I really enjoyed," she said.

Her dissertation is about lunar rocks' geochemistry, and it should take about five years to complete. The rocks she studies were collected during the Apollo missions.

Handling them is amazing, she said, but it gives her butterflies — she's afraid she'll drop them.

Although she intended to study physics, she knew during her first geology class at Cal State it was what she wanted to pursue. A professor told her class geologists get to go to cool places and do science, and that resonated with O'Sullivan.

So far, she's been to Hawaii for a volcanology class through Notre Dame and is going to Iceland next month. She'll spend a week in the capital, Reykjavik, at a conference and the second week camping in the mountains to study volcanoes and glaciers.

For fun, she brews her own beer. Beer and geology go hand-in-hand.

"I think it's because we spend a lot of time out by the campfire," she said.

O'Sullivan hopes to keep working in astro-geology. For now, her internship is her dream job.

"When I got accepted to the internship program, I just thought, 'Wow, this is so cool.' And I still feel that way, eight weeks into it."

**Bakersfield Californian
July 28, 2008**