

# Warm thoughts about 6 weeks in icy Antarctica

By **ZELEDA KOCH**

as told to Elaine Schmidt

Going to Antarctica to work on my undergraduate thesis project was something I had dreamed about since freshman year. I still can't believe I was lucky enough to go.

My job was part research and part mountaineering. I went with a team of two professors, two grad students and one other mountaineer. I was chosen because I am a climber, which means that I could help with rope work and teach rope skills. I'm pretty outdoorsy.

We were on tethers for safety a lot of the time. If someone fell into a crevasse, they could easily drop a thousand feet. Because of the cold, especially if they were injured, getting them out quickly would be critical. The ropes were essential.

We had to watch constantly for crevasses while snowmobiling, which is how we got around. We often didn't know if we were going over a crevasse,

because they were covered with ice and snow. At first, every little thump made me grind my teeth. We never had a problem.

On the first day we went to the outcrop we were studying, two of us got our snowmobiles stuck on a steep hill after the rest of our group had gone ahead.

The others came back and got the snowmobiles out, but it started tipping as I was taking it down the hill. If it had tipped over I would have gone down the hill with it, and so would the person I was tethered to.

It was cold down there, but it doesn't really matter what the temperature is in Antarctica, what matters is the wind. During the first week we were there, living in a remote camp, the wind blew constantly for three days, creating minus-80-degree wind chills.

We couldn't get much work done. We tried, but with that wind chill you could be outside only about five minutes. We just huddled in our tents.

We lived in two-person tents for about six weeks. It was actually pretty warm in the tents most of the time because the sun, which never set, heated the tents pretty well. Mine actually got up to about 80 degrees a couple of times.

We slept in big, down-filled sleeping bags. At night we had to stuff the next day's clothes down inside the bag with us so they would be warm enough to put on in the morning.

We couldn't shower during those six weeks. The cleanest we could get was washing our hair, which meant melting snow and ice and heating it as warm as you could. Still, the hair would freeze to your head as soon as you were done.

It was funny, all those things that you deal with every day in normal life, from doing your hair and makeup to even dealing with money, were gone down there. I even forgot what I looked like.

## HOW I DID IT



**Zelenda Koch** of Germantown, a geoscience major at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, worked as a mountaineer in Antarctica while studying ancient terrestrial glaciation with a team that included UWM professor John Isbell.