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CENTERPIECE

Program Aims To Inspire Kids To Reach For Stars

By ERIN FLYNN Daily News-Record Oct 12, 2016



Jhonatan Escobar-Prado (left), 10, and Lawra Ashkeba, 9, members of the Boys and Girls Club, build a solar system model at its headquarters at the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center on Wednesday.

Nikki Fox / DN-R

HARRISONBURG — A few James Madison University students want children to know that they don't need to be a white man to be a scientist.

This semester, staff members from the John C. Wells Planetarium are hosting a space education program for 9- to 12-year-old members of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County.

The program offers an activity each Wednesday and a trip to the John C. Wells Planetarium once a month.

It's being funded through a \$4,000 Innovative Efforts Award grant from JMU, said Calah Mortensen, a graduate assistant at the planetarium, who co-wrote the grant with Shanil Virani, its director. In addition to the program, the money will be used to provide scholarships for 10 of the children to attend the JMU's Space Explorers Camp next summer.

One of the goals, Mortensen said, is to encourage students to consider a science-related career, regardless of their race or gender.

"There is such a lack of diversity in [science, technology, engineering and math] fields," she said. "This is our attempt to make this a better situation."

According to the National Science Foundation, 51 percent of scientists and engineers working in science and engineering occupations in 2010 were white men.

Meanwhile, 18 percent of women and 13 percent of Asian men held science and engineering jobs.

Space Explorers

During the four-month program, the Thomas Harrison Middle, Skyline Middle, and Smithland, Keister and Waterman elementary students are learning about planets, black holes and how the moon was formed.

"We learned that Jupiter and some of the other planets have rings, but they're invisible," said Haley Santiago, 10, a fifth-grader at Skyline.

On Wednesday, about 15 elementary and middle school students created a solar system model using Play-Doh.

"I like Play-Doh," said 11-year-old Isaiah Wood, a fifth-grader at Thomas Harrison Middle School and the son of Valinda and Larry Wood. "I made an Earth out of it in third grade."

But it's the trip to the planetarium that Isaiah and Haley have enjoyed the most so far.

"I thought it was pretty cool, but the thing that reflects the screen is pretty scary when it rotates," said Haley, the daughter of Amelia Martinez and Daniel Santiago.

Lori Kizner, executive director of the Boys and Girls Clubs, said exposing the students to science careers isn't the only perk.

"It's a good opportunity for JMU students to learn how to work with kids," she said.

Mortensen, 22, of Harrisonburg, has seen a difference in the way the program participants react to the information during the past six weeks.

"At first, it was hard to get them engaged, and today people were shouting out answers," she said. "It's been a shift from 'I don't want to be here' to 'This is fun.'"

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