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NEWS

Math And Science Stars Meet Man Who Went To Space

By John Burton

Photo by John Burton

WEST LONG BRANCH - Math and science can equal fun. Math and science fun? Probably a lot of middle and high school students would find that idea an anathema. But for others, there is joy to be discovered in the equation.

Students who have discovered the joy of science and technology were on hand at Monmouth University last Tuesday evening to celebrate their participation in the Stars Challenge program and to hear from someone who has experienced space travel.

Students who attended were members of Stars Challenge, an extracurricular math and technology program for students in grades six to nine. Students enrolled in the program came to the university for two hours a week for 10 weeks last fall to enhance their understanding of science and technology.

Approximately 50 students from 16 area schools participated, according to information provided by the university. The students were involved in projects entitled "The Wonder of Flight," "Introduction to Experimental Design," and "Thinking Outside the Box," which were taught by selected area teachers.

In addition to learning from the projects that cross a number of disciplines, the students have an outlet for their burgeoning interest in math and science and receive peer support from other like-minded students. "In this room it was considered cool," observed John Valente, who supervised 13 students participating in Thinking Outside the Box. Valente, who teaches physics at the Marine Academy of Science and Technology (MAST), noted of the students, "They all wanted to do this."

Valente's project including having the students design a means of keeping a raw egg thrown about 15 feet from cracking, and build a wind-mill-type, power-generating devise. The project was intended to allow the students to find a solution to a task - and to have some fun doing it, according to Valente.

Participating students were not assigned specific homework and received no formal school credit for their work. "The kids do it because they get to learn how things work," noted Mark Coe, who taught The Wonder of Flight, and teaches at Cedar Drive School, a Colts Neck middle school.

"Everything we did, we got to try out ourselves," said Michael McCarthy, 13, who attends St. Leo The Great School, in the Lincroft section of Middletown. And, Michael continued, "We had to figure it out ourselves."

"It appeals to their (the students') creative side," said Joan Kret, Middletown, whose son Dylan participated in the Wonder of Flight.

"This was so much fun for him," Kret said about her son. "He loved to come to class."

The Stars Challenge was the brainchild of Steve and Margaret Ann Chappell, a husband and wife, who are both highly educated and had careers in the computer/ telecommunications/technology industry.

The idea came to them, Margaret Ann explained, after she and her husband visited China and reading the Thomas Friedman's book *The World Is Flat*, which details what the advances in technology means for global trade and politics. Studies have indicated Americans lag behind other nations, including developing ones such as India, in the areas of science and technology. Chappell said she and her husband hoped their program would interest students in continuing to pursue those disciplines.



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Approximately a year ago the Chappells began partnering with Monmouth University to establish the program, which recently completed its first session. The program is scheduled to commence again in about a week's time. This year it has been expanded and will include Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, Steve Chappell said.

"It is incredibly rewarding to me to watch students learn," said Monmouth University President Paul G. Gaffney in his introduction for the evening's event. "More rewarding to me is to see students try to create new knowledge."

That idea, which has contributed to America's advances on so many fronts in the 20th century, "is somewhat at risk today," Gaffney continued. But this program, "keeps that hope alive."

"Don't give up," was the advice offered by Greg Olsen, who was the evening's guest speaker.

Had he given up Olsen would have not been able to achieve what he was able to do in 2005: actually travel in space and spend 10 days on the International Space Station.

Olsen is not an astronaut; he was a research scientist and entrepreneur whosubsequently sold his successful technology firm for \$600 million dollars.

After the downturn in technology firms in the early 2000s, Olsen and his partners reacquired the company for \$6 million and later sold it again for \$60 million, according to Steve Chappell.

One day, while drinking coffee in a local Starbuck's, Olsen said he came across a story about space adventures available for a price.

Olsen pursued joining Russians who were scheduled to be sent into orbit to spend time in the space station and became the third private citizen to orbit the earth.

Olsen, who is in his 60s but looks quite fit, told of his six-month training with cosmonauts and how he almost wasn't allowed to go because of a health development. He recovered and continued the training, he said.

"I persevered and went into space," he said.

He traveled at 17,000 miles- per-hour and more than 225 miles into orbit to reach the station, spending nearly two weeks in the weightless state.

"I was elated," he said.

While attending high school in Bergen County, he failed trigonometry, Olsen said, , but he persevered and went on to get degrees in physics and a Ph.D. In materials sciences. And it has been his experiences that allowed him to offer his advice.

"Success is easy," he told the audience, which included large number of middle- and high school- aged students. "It's in the down time you find out what you're made of."