

Where Staring Into Space Is Actually Encouraged

By JULIE RASICOT
Special to The Washington Post

Sitting in the dark, several first-graders at Wood Acres Elementary School gazed at the constellations arrayed above them, listening as parent Erika Jorgensen explained the Greek myth about the warriors depicted in the stars of the Gemini constellation.

"One of the twins was immortal, and one was mortal," she said. "And they were in a lot of battles long, long ago in Greek times."

The constellation's outline was clearly lighted on the 14-foot-high metal dome of the Bethesda school's planetarium, the only planetarium in a county school.

Since 1982, Wood Acres students have learned about astronomy by studying the night sky in the planetarium and through lessons in its classroom. The beige dome is suspended by chains from the ceiling over a carpeted circular pit in the retrofitted classroom.

Through a program run by trained parent volunteers at Wood Acres, students in first through fifth grades visit the planetarium six times a year for 45-minute lessons. The program for kindergartners is more condensed; students attend one lesson each week for six weeks, said parent Eloise Keary, who is in charge of scheduling and training for the PTA's planetarium committee.

During a class Friday, Jorgensen and John Adams, a parent and NASA aerospace engineer, taught the first-graders about the solar system before gathering the youngsters under the dome. Projecting colorful images of planets on a large screen, Adams talked about their characteristics.

"Do planets shine?" he asked. "Planets don't shine like stars, but they will reflect light. That's why you can see them at night."

After about 30 minutes of discussion, Adams and Jorgensen moved the students under the dome and turned out the lights. Using a red laser pointer, Adams showed the students what they might see in the sky on a July night.

"The three brightest stars that you see over your head are called the summer triangle," Adams said.

The planetarium, which was originally at the former Brookmont Elementary School in Bethesda, was the brainchild of Osceola Sexton, a science specialist who taught in 23 schools, according to a history of the planetarium written in 2005.

After the planetarium was installed at Brookmont in 1973, Sexton trained teachers in its use, and students from local schools came for lessons. But since Sexton frequently had to travel to other schools to teach, the planetarium often sat unused. Parent volunteer Barbara Muller began teach-



BY ANDREA BOHNE

Planetarium volunteer Eloise Keary leads students on the "Walk of the Planets," to teach them the figurative distance of each planet from the sun.

ing classes in 1974, the official start of the parent volunteer program, and later taught astronomy classes full time, according to the history.

When Brookmont was closed in 1982, its students and the planetarium moved to Wood Acres.

About 100 parent volunteers are trained to teach in the planetarium. Volunteers, who do not need an astronomy background, are taught how to use the dome equipment and how to develop lesson plans, which can include science experiments and crafts.

"We've got parents who come in who are astronomers, scientists and teachers," said Keary, a former teacher. "We have parents who just think it's really cool and want to do something with their kids."

Adams said that he enjoys the students' enthusiasm and that he hopes that his classes will inspire them to study space when they are older.

Adams said he would think that he had done his job "if I can just get one kid to go outside and look up and say, 'What's that?'" His daughter Deanna is a first-grader.

Although Adams uses his NASA experience to prepare for class, he said that a previous job as a projectionist has proved just as helpful in the planetarium.

"That's probably the best preparation for being able to do this," he said.

Principal Marita Sherburne said the school couldn't operate the planetarium without the parent volunteers because teachers wouldn't have enough time for the extra lessons. In

addition to preparing lessons, many parents take time off from work to teach in the planetarium, she said.

"They come in and rehearse," Sherburne said. "They're here at 7 o'clock at night. They're here at all hours."

The planetarium classes correspond with the appropriate curriculum for each grade level and may expand upon lessons in other subjects, such as Greek mythology, Keary said.

"Children learn to identify the constellations and the various stars within the constellation," Keary said. "The constellations change over the year. So what they learn in December is different from what they learn in May."

One of the more popular planetarium lessons for second-graders takes place outdoors. During the "Walk of the Planets," the students use footsteps to pace off the figurative distance of each planet from the sun "to give the children a sense of scale," Keary said.

On a warm sunny morning last week, several second-graders gathered on the sidewalk in front of the school for their walk, carrying blue pennants bearing the planets' names.

"As we walk," Keary told the group, "we're going to realize that some of the planets are close to the sun, and some are a long, long way away."

Keary lined up some students near a yellow ball on a stick and headed down the walkway. "If the sun was here, and we were walking to Mercury, we need to walk 10 steps," she said.

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TOM LANSWORTH
Editor,
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After walking 10 steps, Keary asked a student to pull a tiny seed from an envelope to demonstrate Mercury's size compared with that of the sun. Students also answered questions about the planet before walking nine steps to where Venus would be.

"That wasn't so far away," Keary said. "That's why we can see Venus and Mars in the night sky. They're not so far from here."

As the students counted off steps to reach the farthest planets, they traveled nearly completely around the school grounds. Students peppered Keary with questions.

"Me and my dad were wondering if you were two miles away from a black hole, would you get sucked in?" second-grader Rebecca Hirsh said. (She said her dad told her later that a person that close would indeed be pulled in.)

By the end of the class period, the students had finished the planet walk and headed back to the front of the school to wait for their classmates.

"At least we didn't get sucked into a black hole," Rebecca noted. "My dad said that once you go in, you merely get crushed."