



The YMCA Out-Of-School Experience

Launching Kids Into Outer Space After School

By *Maryalicia Johnson*

Is space exploration consistent with the YMCA mission? Our YMCA works diligently to meet our mission of reaching youth with positive options, while expanding the boundaries of what a traditional after school program should offer.

Whether the positive option is within our YMCA, or outside of our four walls, using after school programs to help our next generation reach for the stars is a vital component to preparing our future leaders. We are recognized for our ability to prepare leaders, and tomorrow's leaders can thrive in after school activities that may lead us to more outer space missions.

We are all really focused on helping the next generation build spirit, mind,

and body, and that's a solid foundation for any planetary pursuit we can deliver. What can begin with encouraging a kid to pursue math and science foundations through an after school career exploration activity, can launch into budding young minds gathering in your YMCA to learn about traveling to another planet, while in a safe, supervised environment here on Earth.

We began gazing at Orlando's tourist-rich offerings, and took advantage of an education-

ally-based community outreach program offered by Kennedy Space Center. We had the advantage of living in a major tourist capital; many of these concepts can level the playing field for YMCAs anywhere.

The Central Florida YMCA teamed up with two of our local county governments, and participated in the Next Generation Explorers program, sponsored by Space Florida at Kennedy Space Center. We utilized this educational outreach by the Space Center to inspire 400 of our YMCA After School Zone middle school students to look at space exploration options.

The program, which was designed to meet Sunshine State Educational Standards, immersed our sixth through eighth grade students in interactive, informative, and inspiring experiences designed to motivate them to study math and science.

SOME EXAMPLES

Our participants were placed in the same room with astronauts, engineers, and innovators to show them some examples of where an education in math and science can lead. There were many options including Tour of the Universe program; Science on a Sphere, developed by the National Association of Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA);



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astronaut-led Cool Space Careers question and answer sessions; an introduction to scientists and engineers; weather balloon release; and the new Shuttle Launch Experience attraction at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex.

Two Next Generation Explorers captured local news appearances while at the Space Center. "I get to see lots of different things that I don't normally see. I think it would be cool if I actually went into space and saw Mars," said Marvalyn Briscoe, a YMCA participant. "It also helps me in my science and geography," said Chris Holden. "When I grow up and get a college education, I'd like to try to get a job at NASA and hopefully try to go into space."

The programs were offered as part of the inaugural World Space Expo, celebrating NASA's 50 years of space exploration. The educational components are available to other YMCAs through military organizations, First Lego League, NOAA, universities, museums, and other government or educational entities in your region. World Space Expo's Next Generation Explorers information can be found at www.worldspaceexpo.com/explorers_program.htm.

SOME OPTIONS

Here are a few options for lining up your out-of-this-world after school experience:

The NASA Educator Resource Center at the John F. Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex (<http://www.kennedyspacecenter.com/educatorsParents/educational.asp>) provides expertise and facilities to help educators access and utilize science, mathematics, and technology instructional products.

These products are based on NASA's unique mission and are aligned with the national and state standards. Among the resources available are videos, slides, lesson plans, publications, and lunar and meteorite samples.



experiences that give students a unique perspective on what goes into putting any craft into space. More than 100 lesson plans exist for teachers to choose from when preparing their students for the missions. The lessons cover topics such as motion, history, and classification.

Science On a Sphere is a large global planetary display that uses computers and video. NOAA's educational program is designed to increase public understanding of the environment. NOAA uses the program as an instrument to enhance informal

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educational programs in science centers, universities, and museums across the country. Science On a Sphere is available to any YMCA.

Space Explorers (<http://www.spaceexplorers.com/>) is an Internet-based program with virtual missions, experiments, and technology. The sky's literally the limit with this resource to inspire a new generation of space explorers.

Mission: Solar System allows students to take on the roles of scientists and engineers as they send spacecraft to the moon, Mars, or a nearby asteroid. Students work in teams or as individuals to accomplish the specific goals of each mission.

The missions are authentic

SPORTS-LIKE FUN

The First Lego League (<http://www.firstlegoleague.org/>) exhibition teams are organized applications of math, science, and technology. Participants (ages 9-14) are challenged with an international program that combines a hands-on, interactive robotics program and a research presentation with a sports-like atmosphere. Teams consist of up to 10 members and focus on such things as team building, problem solving, creativity, and analytical thinking.

Expanding horizons for our after school programs can create results that further substantiate why YMCAs have what it takes to be a performance-driven educational partner. We've designed innovative after school programs for more than 5,000 Central Florida YMCA kids that have proven to improve school attendance, student conduct, and relationships with adults.

Our research results show that students who participate in the YMCAs after school programs attend school 1.4 more days than students who do not participate in the program. Of those students, 99 percent do not have juvenile justice records. In addition, 84 percent of students who participate in the program who have a GPA above 2.0 increase their GPA after joining the program.

We all understand how critical after school time can be for our next generation. That's why our thirst as an organization to seek out beyond traditional after school program boundaries will solidify our mission to inspire our future leaders for years to come. **P**