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[Thursday, Nov. 6, 2003]

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## Center here sends kids' aspirations rocketing

10/31/2003

### Middle-schoolers take "trip to Mars" in preview of new Challenger site

By Carolyn Bower  
*Of the Post-Dispatch*

Standing next to a photo of seven astronauts who died on a mission to space, Mellisa Duncan encouraged eighth-graders from St. Louis to pursue careers in math, science and technology.

Duncan talked about the crew who died in February when the space shuttle Columbia broke apart, and of the seven who died 17 years earlier on the space shuttle Challenger.

"You can continue their mission of exploring," said Duncan, a former teacher who is now a "flight director" at the Challenger Learning Center-St. Louis. "You use math, science and technology not just as astronauts but in all kinds of careers. That's why you are here today."

The center will open Nov. 17. It is located just west of Florissant Road and about a mile north of Interstate 70.

On Thursday, Andrea Neals' science class at Gateway Middle School became the first students to try out the Challenger center equipment, with a simulated mission to Mars. The center will offer

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programs for middle-schoolers in Missouri and Illinois, as well as the public.

The St. Louis center is the second in Missouri (Kansas City has one) and the 49th in the world.

After the Challenger exploded on Jan. 28, 1986, the astronauts' relatives conceived of the centers as a way to help people understand how the crew lived.

Duncan told the 19 eighth-graders that half would take a simulated mission to Mars, while half remained on the ground at mission control. After an hour or so, the groups would switch.

Wearing blue flight suits, Duncan and other adults at the center led a group of students through a dark airlock into the Mars Transport Vehicle, a room patterned after a spaceship. Monitors on a wall in the spaceship showed televised pictures of Mars and the planet's moons, Deimos and Phobos. Monitors in mission control showed student astronauts conducting experiments aboard the transport vehicle.

Kevin Dang, 13, gave other astronauts vision and blood pressure tests. Christian Cotton, 14, plunged his hands through a wall into rubber gloves that allowed him to examine pyrite and magnetite.

Some students used robots to position glass flasks of colorful liquids onto a scale or hoist a filter to measure radiation levels and detect any leak in the spacecraft's propulsion system. They sent the information to students in mission control to analyze.

Duncan reminded two students to close an airlock before they left one area of the spacecraft or everyone would be sucked into space.

There were a few tense moments. As the spacecraft prepared to land on Mars, Duncan urged a student navigator to make a computer correction.

"We're coming in fast," she said.

Like a close call in a video game, the moment passed and the craft touched down safely.

As Kevin walked with classmates to mission control's bank of computers, he said, "I might want to be an astronaut now."

Not Stephanie Lloyd, 13. "It was fun, but I'm still interested in becoming a pediatrician," she said.

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