

Space conference changes students' views on life

BY RUTH CAMPBELL

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For a group of Falcon Early College High School students, attending the recent National Center **for** Earth and Space Science **Education** conference in Washington, D.C., was a life-changing experience.

The youngsters gave a presentation on a science experiment they designed called "The Efficacy of Ideonella sakaiensis in a Microgravity Environment." The experiment was launched into space from Cape Canaveral by Space X as part of its 15th Commercial Resupply Services Mission to the International Space Station.

The experiment involves plastic-eating microbes and tests whether the recently discovered bacterium Ideonella sakaiensis can decompose Poly(ethylene terephthalate) (PET) plastic in microgravity as well as it does on Earth. Osborne said it would stay up **for** about a month. The students watched the launch on a big screen at the National Air and Space Museum. The district was one of 31 communities in the United States, Canada and Brazil accepted into America's Spaceflight Program.

For the students, Ector County Independent School District Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne said it was a moving, life-changing event.

"They saw a world they didn't know existed," Osborne said. "It changed the way they viewed life and opportunity."

The students raised money **for** the trip themselves and the community stepped up. He noted that the experiment got lots of support from the UTPB and the University of California, Davis, as well.

Osborne said Falcon ECHS teacher Cindy Mc-Cord donated \$100 **for** each student to spend on the trip and teacher Lydia Roundtree and Lindsey Lumpkin, the former Falcon principal, donated gift baskets.

AVID teacher and PICK **Education** Ambassador Elizabeth Gray also wrote a grant, said Gabriela Granado, research and innovation strategist.

Lumpkin is now an assistant principal at Permian High School.

Osborne said a donation campaign is ongoing **for** mission patches. If someone donates \$20 or more they get a patch. Proceeds go toward next year's conference. **For** more information, visit www.pickedu.com.

The 10 students saw the Marine Barracks in Washington, also known as 8th and I, the National Archives, monuments on the National Mall, the Library of Congress, Arlington National Cemetery and the Capitol,

to name a few. Osborne added that they saw House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and the White House.

"We need to do that **for** more kids and really expand it to give them those opportunities because it's just that mind shift. These kids came back to Ector County, their lives changed forever. If you do that **for** one kid, it's going to make a difference **for** 10 more just from that impact," Osborne said. Osborne said student Deidre Morales was invited back next year to share the results of the experiment.

Gray said the experience was invaluable to her students and she said the presenters did an amazing job. The experience also prompted her to sign up **for** a mechanical engineering degree, with an aerospace engineering strand, from the University of Texas of the Permian Basin.

She said there were tears of joy when the experiment launched.

"It was one of the best moments of my life," Gray said.

She added that being in Washington with her students really sums up why she's a teacher and why she loves what she does.

"I got to know the students on a much more personal level. I think it just made our relationship stronger," Gray said.

Damien Galindo, 16, who will be going into 11th grade this fall, was one of the students who went to Washington. He said the experience was overwhelming at first, but there were other students there with common interests.

Also, seeing all the sights and people was breathtaking.

Before he went, Galindo said he was leaning toward being an orthopedic surgeon and now he's considering NASA or aerospace engineering.



Group photo of the kids attending the National Center **for** Earth and Space Science **Education** conference in Washington, D.C.

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