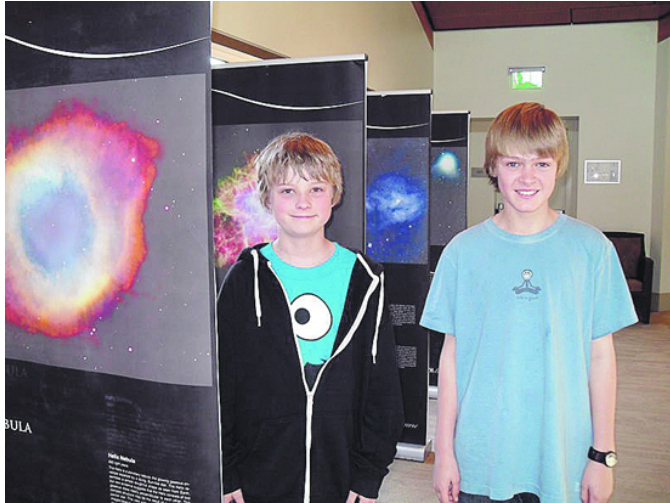


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NASA Photos from Space Make an Impact on Students

By Cathy Tyson



Sebastian Marlow, left, and Will Fry in the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Photo C. Tyson

"The universe is a big puzzle, we are figuring it out one piece at a time," said Dr. Margaret Race at a special program, "From the Earth to the Universe," for students in grades five through twelve. With a fabulous PowerPoint presentation of amazing celestial images from NASA, she illustrated and described in simple terms planets, moons, the solar system and beyond. One of the slides was a chart from a few years ago that demonstrated exactly how much our understanding has changed even recently - in 1997 scientists calculated the number of moons in our solar system at 77 in total; as of 2007, scientists agree there are 169 moons, "and still counting," said Race.

This award-winning NASA exhibit has been making the rounds; between 2009 - 2010 it has been shown at 1,000 locations in over sixty countries.

As an astrobiologist, Race works on the origin, evolution and distribution of life in the universe. "Where do we come from? Are we alone? I look for evidence of life," said Race. She works with NASA on analyzing environmental impact issues of contamination during robotic and human missions to the moon and Mars. She's also part of the Solar System Ambassadors Program.

Race focused her attention on Stanley Middle School and volunteered her time to develop extensive classroom materials and taught teachers how to teach inspiring lessons that also meet state curriculum requirements. Although the kids just started a solar system unit, teacher Alice Cyr said, "We're trying to get the students excited," encouraging learning outside of the classroom.

Seventh grader Nathan Brickman said, "Ms. Winter inspired me to learn." Oddly enough, science teacher Ms. Winter was standing nearby. Brickman worked on the flyer that was posted around school announcing the event. In typical teenage style, a group of Stanley eighth graders mentioned ten extra credit points for attending, but they clearly enjoyed the presentation.

Megan Kaye, a tenth grader who had met Race at Career Day at Acalanes High School, said the lecture was easy to understand and helped put the solar system in context. It was hard not to be impressed with spectacular photos of nebula.

It took a village to put this together: help from Senior Library Manager Susan Weaver and Miss Donna - story time related to the images; the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation; and of course Consortium Partner Chabot Space and Science Center, Lafayette and Antioch Schools and generous funding from the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation. The students were quite impressed with the complimentary and so appropriate Luna Bars and water care of Diablo Foods and Trader Joe's.

Reaching out, the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation is funding a roadtrip for the materials with "Chabot to Go" activities that include astronomy-themed activities based on stars, galaxies, constellations, the solar system and more that will circulate at several Antioch schools.

Wrapping up the event, Race recommended checking out NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory website, at www.jpl.nasa.gov, for more fantastic images and challenged the students, "Now it's your turn to figure out the puzzle."

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