

Rocket Kids '09

An Interdisciplinary Project

Dalhart Junior High School – Dalhart, Texas

By Keli An Frates, Dalhart Jr. High Art Teacher

“Shoot for the moon and if you miss you will still be among stars.” Les Brown

The above quote describes the efforts of the teachers at Dalhart Junior High School. This project was launched over coffee one June morning in my kitchen. A group of teachers was brainstorming ideas for a chance at receiving an education foundation grant. After some back and forth, the consensus was, as they say in Texas, “Hey, we’re fixin’ to read a space book, build some model rockets and paint a space mural. Pass me another cinnamon roll, please.” Great ideas are born at the kitchen table, and these objectives evolved into the three main premises of our grant, Rocket Kids ‘09.

This project was funded by our own Dalhart Education Foundation. Our small but progressive town had the foresight two years ago to create an education foundation, whose sole purpose promotes innovative educational opportunities for the children of Dalhart. With this education grant, the teachers at Dalhart Junior High collaborated to create a 6-week interdisciplinary rocket experience for the 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. This cross-curricular approach united teachers into taking different approaches to focus on one theme: space and rockets.

Dom Testa’s book, *The Comet’s Curse*, provided the central theme for this project. Through the language arts department, all the students read and discussed the adventures of 251 teenagers traveling aboard Galahad. The book launched the following activities into orbit around the school.

Our science department tackled the task of constructing and launching model rockets. Students worked in teams of four to build a model rocket. The excitement of launch day thrilled the hearts and minds of kids as 100 rockets soared into the Texas panhandle sky.

The art department's main objective was for every student to contribute to an all school mural, in which they would paint their own galactic element on a 4' by 36' panel. Students used their math problem-solving skills to design their element, which could not be larger than 24 square inches. Vibrant planets, gaseous nebulas, flying rockets and of course comets cover these panels. Displayed in the center of our own little galaxy, the school library, students delight in finding their own star among the mass of 400 celestial bodies.

The initial major project served as an inspiration to other projects not included in the original grant. The spirit of Rocket Kids blossomed, with the following events taking place.

Our rural town of 7,000 people is 85 miles from Amarillo, the largest city in the panhandle of Texas. Due to our isolated location, some of our students have never ridden an elevator, let alone seen a planetarium. As a result, the Amarillo Discovery Center's Star Lab, a portable, inflatable planetarium, was brought to Dalhart Jr. High for two days. Every student had a planetarium adventure without leaving school!

The international astronomy community declared 2009 'The International Year of Astronomy' in recognition of the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first observations through a telescope. For this celebration, NASA released photos from the Hubble Telescope library to the public. Our technology department downloaded and printed these space images onto poster-sized prints. These prints were displayed throughout the school, showing students real life images of space.

Special Education students transformed a small conference room into a spectacular galaxy with black paper, fluorescent paint and black lights. Our colorful history teacher portrayed Galileo over the intercom, giving the student body a historical Galilean perspective during morning announcements. A space-themed collection of music provided by the music teacher played themes from *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and other outer space recordings. History classes saw videos and discussed the importance of NASA, just across the state in Houston.

There's a lot to be said about ideas being shared with coffee around a kitchen table. We probably didn't land on the moon, but the stars are bigger and brighter in the panhandle skies over Dalhart!