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Young Women Return From NASA Learning Experience

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By Ashleigh Oldland, Staff Writer



QUITE A FIELD TRIP. The female participants of the NASA Learning Experience last week during their visit to the Kennedy Space Center. —Photo courtesy Katie Johns

For 30 fifth grade girls from Long Beach, last week's trip to Cape Canaveral was not the final frontier, but it was a big step towards going where few women have gone before.

Academic young ladies, especially those who have excelled in math and science classes, were chosen from underserved communities in Long Beach to tour the Kennedy Space Center and get a behind the scenes tour of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's launch pads. The program, "NASA Learning Experience," was organized by California State University, Long Beach's College of Engineering.

"This experience is just an extension of what we do with our women in engineering programs," said Lily Gossage, director of engineering

recruitment and retention at CSULB. Gossage, who is also the diversity chair for the Women in Engineering Proactive Network, coordinates several programs at CSULB meant to encourage girls who are academically advanced to become more interested in math, science and engineering. "Overall in professional practice, less than 10% of engineers are women," Gossage said.

Getting the fifth graders to Florida for five days wasn't easy. Gossage said she applied for a grant from NASA to pay for the trip. Since all the students came from low-income homes, she had to find donors to pay for luggage, sunglasses, toothbrushes, school supplies, backpacks and T-shirts for the girls to keep. And she needed special permission from Long Beach Unified School District for the trip since the girls were younger than other groups accepted into the program.

More than 50 young ladies applied to participate. For those who were selected, Gossage said most had never been on an airplane or out of the state before.

Jennifer Pena, 11, was one of the participants who had never been on an airplane before. She said the trip inspired her to want to be an engineer or astronaut. "There was one astronaut who told us that he had tried to get into NASA's program for 10 years," she said. "He said that you should never give up. If you have a dream, try to fulfill it." Pena, who is going into sixth grade at Stanford Middle School, said she enjoyed seeing the launch pad at NASA and going into a simulator. "We got on this ride, and it felt like a rocket would feel taking off into space," she said.

The girls were able to visit the Saturn V rocket display, International Space Station centers and the Astronauts Hall of Fame. At the Kennedy Space Center, they met astronauts and scientists as well as Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played Lieutenant Uhura in the television series "Star Trek."

Samantha Vilano, 11, said she was excited to get Nichols' autograph and go on the different tours. Vilano is going into sixth grade at Hill Classical Middle School. In the essay Vilano wrote to apply for the program, she wrote: "I always dream of what people will do in space in the future."

Profiles and essays from each of the girls may be viewed at www.csulbchaat.org/outreach/nasa-experience/participants.