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# Campers query orbiting astronaut

HAM-RADIO CHAT LINKS ASTRONOMY PROGRAM WITH SPACE STATION

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KELLY PRESNELL / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Don McCarthy, a University of astronomer, talks with Astronomy Camp members after they asked questions of astronaut Chris Cassidy aboard the International Space Station.

June 09, 2013 12:00 am • [Kimberly Matas Arizona Daily Star](#) (0) Comments

A short time ago, in an auditorium close, close by, 30 teens boldly went where no University of Arizona astronomy camper had gone before: the International Space Station.

For 10 minutes on Saturday - in voice, at least - Astronomy Camp participants boarded the Space Station as it passed over Australia, orbiting 250 miles above the Earth, for a ham-radio chat with one of its astronauts, Chris Cassidy. It was the first time in the camp's 25-year history that students

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contacted the International Space Station.

"It was so amazing to talk to an actual astronaut," Kevin Yee, 13, of Austin, Texas, said. Though Yee didn't get to ask his question about life aboard the space station, he was thrilled nonetheless with the opportunity to listen in as other campers asked questions.

The group met at Steward Observatory on the UA campus, where they were linked to the space station by a program called ARISS - Amateur Radio on the International Space Station. Ham-radio operators all over the world volunteer to facilitate chats with space station astronauts and cosmonauts.

Former participant Dayanara Sixkiller, 15, was so enthusiastic during her two summers at the camp that event organizer Don McCarthy invited her to attend Saturday's chat as a representative for the Tohono O'odham Nation and ask the first question. Though the astronaut's answer to her question about his favorite space station experiment was garbled by static, it didn't dampen her enthusiasm for the program.

The Baboquivari High School student didn't attend camp this year because she is taking summer classes at Tohono O'odham Community College in preparation for medical school. But she plans to attend the adult astronomy camp next year.

"Astronomy is one of my favorite subjects," she said.

This year 16 girls and 14 boys from 14 states are attending the weeklong UA Teen Astronomy Camp organized by McCarthy, a UA astronomer. Almost half of the students were able to attend the camp because of scholarships funded by the Sun City Vistoso Astronomy Club.

The campers spend the week at Kitt Peak National Observatory about 50 miles southwest of Tucson on the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation, using equipment typically accessible only to researchers. Astronomy Camp is the first place some of the teens encounter like-minded peers.

"A lot of these students come from places ... where their interests in science and technology aren't shared," McCarthy said.

For Denisse Tzoc of Houston, it was her brother who recognized her interest in astronomy and enrolled the 13-year-old in the UA program.

So far at camp, she said, "I've seen Saturn, we all learned how to use a telescope - a big telescope - we learned how stars are compacted together and about light waves.

"I think there's more out there to discover," Tzoc said of her curiosity about space.

Space is, after all, the final frontier.

"I've seen Saturn, we all learned how to use a telescope - a big telescope - we learned how stars are compacted together and about light waves."

Denisse Tzoc

"It was so amazing to talk to an actual astronaut."

Kevin Yee, 13

Contact reporter Kimberly Matas at [kmatas@azstarnet.com](mailto:kmatas@azstarnet.com) or at 573-4191.

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