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Students turn eyes to the sky for rocket launch

By Ramon Renteria EL PASO TIMES

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UPHAM, N.M. - Maybe it wasn't exactly Cape Canaveral, but 800 students had at least 21 reasons to celebrate what they described as an awesome aerospace adventure.

At 7:21 a.m. Friday, a nervous Aileen Montana of El Paso twisted a knob that hurled a 20-foot rocket with 21 student experiments from the desert floor 72 miles into space within three minutes. Estimated speed: 3,800 mph.

Montana, 14, an eighth-grade student at Brown Middle School, and her classmates designed an experiment to determine the effects of microgravity on a marshmallow.

"I was nervous, but I just turned the knob and the rocket took off," Montana said later. "Amazing."

Students cheered and high-fived each other as the rocket disappeared into the clear blue sky, leaving only a powerful sonic boom and a snake-like plume of smoke.

An estimated 1,200 visitors, including elementary, middle school, high school and college students from New Mexico, Arizona and Texas watched the rocket launch, the third student launch put on by the New Mexico Space Grant Consortium with NASA funding.

The launch site, not far from the historic Camino Real used by Spanish explorers, is about six miles from the futuristic-looking hangar and terminal building where Virgin Galactic will launch the first commercial flights into space sometime in the future.

While Virgin Galactic has not set a specific date for flying commercial passengers into space, Spaceport officials said the building is about 75 percent complete and

is expected to be finished within six months.

The student launch rocket floated back to earth about 15 minutes later in a parachute. It was retrieved about 33 miles away at the nearby White Sands Missile Range.

An Army helicopter returned the experiment portion of the rocket to the launch area by mid-morning. Technicians then brought the rocket to a huge tent so that students could retrieve and examine the data from their experiments.

Hundreds of students poured into the tent, eager to photograph the rocket. The congestion prompted Pat Hynes, director of the New Mexico Space Grant Consortium, to comment: "This is like seeing the pope or something."

Students and teachers at Brown Middle School are still analyzing the results but they're convinced their experiment in space worked.

"It's totally awesome," Brown Middle School seventh-grader Francisco Manuel Dominguez said after checking out marshmallows that resembled white raisins after a quick trip into space. "Hopefully we got some good results."

Alex Armendariz, a science teacher at Brown Middle School, said what mattered most is that students had the opportunity to see a project they worked hard to develop go up in space.

The experiments varied widely, from Las Cruces Mesa Middle School's efforts to send text messages to a cell phone and a satellite phone on the rocket to Aztec High School's attempts to find out if a New

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Mexico chile would heat up or get roasted in space.

New Mexico Space Grant officials applauded the student launch. The consortium spent \$250,000 for the rocket and other launch related costs.

"It was a huge success," said Joylynn Watkins, an engineer with the New Mexico Space Grant. "We plan to continue to educate and inspire students to do math and science projects."

The New Mexico program is the only program of its kind in the United States that gives students access to space once a year, usually toward the end of the academic year.

Christine Anderson, executive director of the New Mexico Spaceport Authority, gave students, teachers and parents a slide tour of what the spaceport will look like when completed. The Spaceport Authority operates on a \$209 million annual budget and one day expects to be a commercial launch pad for research and development payloads as well as commercial space flights.

"This is such a fabulous venue to have space experiments," Anderson said. "Here, I look out and I see astronauts and I see scientists and I see engineers."

At least five Las Cruces schools put student experiments on the rocket.

Albert Prieto, a second-grade teacher at Mesilla Park Elementary in Las Cruces, took time off to go see his daughter's school experiment fly into space.

"They got to see the full gamut of their experiment," Prieto said. "That's really neat and practical."

Jeanette Miller, a middle school math teacher, and another teacher brought 31 students from Tohatchi, N.M., 20 miles north of Gallup in northwestern New Mexico.

"Just taking part in the experiments and making it real for the students instead of just learning in the classroom, that's the benefit," Miller said.


Jeff Berman, a producer with the Discovery Channel in Canada, conducted various interviews to try to capture the creative spirit depicted in the different student experiments for a show called "Daily Planet."

"This is a story about the whole launch and the chance for kids to get involved in the aerospace adventure," he said.

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