

Young scientists learn about Mars research

Westlake Elementary science club speaker focuses on red planet

NASA

By Emily Benson

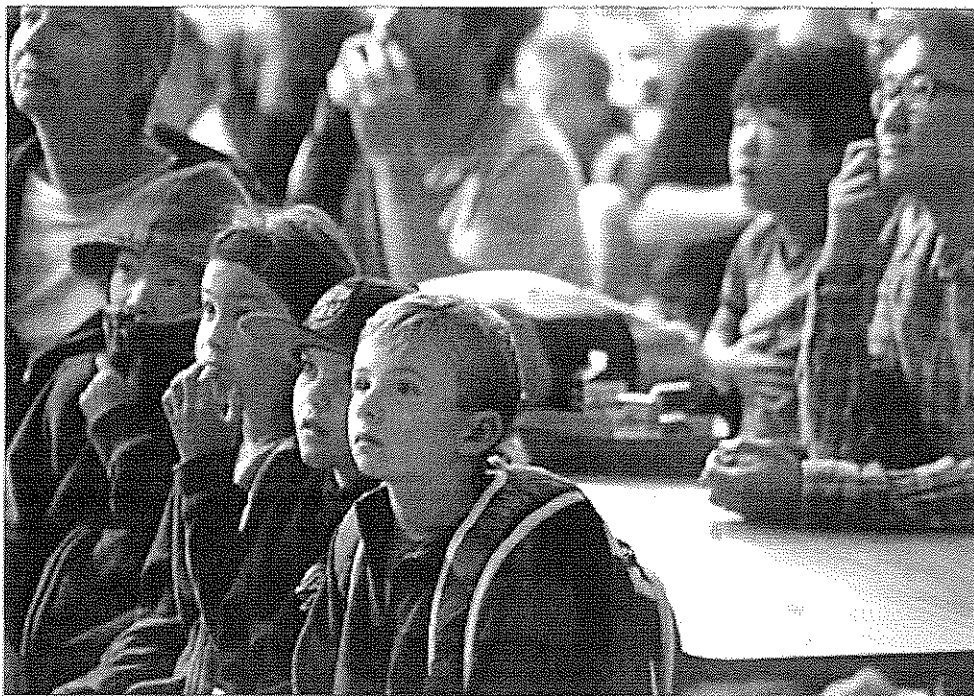
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SANTACRUZ>> Amid the basketball hoops and music stands lining the walls, potential future astronauts gathered around cafeteria tables early Wednesday morning to listen to a presentation on NASA programs at Westlake Elementary School.

The first speaker in Westlake's six-week Young Scientist Club series was Gary L. Martin, director of partnerships at NASA's Ames Research Center. He told the crowd of about 100 students and parents about NASA's plans to send astronauts to Mars.

The Young Scientist Club will feature five more scientists this fall, including presentations by researchers from UC Santa Cruz and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The scientists will discuss volcanoes, El Niño, and pumas, among other topics.

The club meets before school on Wednesdays mornings, at 7:30 a.m.



Members of the Westlake Elementary School Young Scientists Club watch with rapt attention as Director of the Partnerships Directorate at NASA Ames Research Center, and Santa Cruz resident, Gary Martin kicks off the Westlake program's fourth year with a presentation about sending people to Mars.

SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

“To get kids here that early in the morning is pretty impressive,” said Deana Tanguay, Westlake parent and co-founder of the club. “They get excited about science.”

Tanguay and fellow Westlake parent Gabrielle Prochaska founded the Young Scientist Club in 2012. In their efforts to expose elementary school students to science and scientific careers, they decided to focus on the wealth of research happening in the Santa Cruz area.

The two founders of the club encourage speakers to include a hands-on or visual element in each presentation, which occasionally leads to unintended consequences. One researcher brought squid, Tanguay said, which turned out to be smelly enough to fill the room with their scent.

“Squid look really weird,” remembered her son, fourth-grader Luke Tanguay. Though the students didn’t like how the squid smelled, they were still excited to see them, said Deana Tanguay.

Wednesday’s presentation focused on NASA’s past and future efforts to explore Mars and other objects in space.

“Have you guys heard we’re going to go to an asteroid?” Martin asked, to gasps of surprise from the audience. Martin explained that asteroids may harbor water that can be used to fuel rockets or keep astronauts alive. He also mentioned that scientists recently discovered flowing water on Mars. The red planet contains all the elements needed for life, he said.

“Can you drink the water on Mars?” science-minded fifth-grader Larissa Balsley asked.

“You probably couldn’t just drink it right away,” Martin said, because it’s very salty. But, he added, you could purify it.

Martin said that children are natural explorers, so it makes sense that they would be interested in NASA’s space programs.

“NASA’s all about answering things we don’t know the answers to,” he said.

Westlake parents Angela Dobkin and Kimberly Sanford-Yi took over leadership of the club this year. The club is sustained by parents and speakers who volunteer their time, Dobkin said. There’s no charge for the students to attend.

Larissa, the fifth-grader who asked about drinking water, said she was excited about recent revelations on Mars.

“I think it’s really cool that they discovered water,” she said. “There might be life on there.”



NASA’s Gary Martin speaks at Westlake Elementary School on Wednesday.