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U.S. Space Camp a blast for youth

By **Heidi Hougham**/Independent Newspapers

A three-page essay did more than wow Jenifer O'Neil's and Jason Hoover's teachers, it propelled them to the moon -- almost.

The pair attended Space Camp July 11-18 in Huntsville, Ala., where they learned what it would be like to walk on the moon, among other things.

Jason's and Jenifer's interest was piqued when their teachers mentioned scholarships for Space Camp were up for grabs.

"I really wanted to go. I thought it would be a good opportunity to meet people and have a different experience," said Jennifer, an eighth-grader at Highland Lakes School. "I am really interested in science."

"When I grow up I want to be an astronaut," Jason, an eighth-grader at Deer Valley Middle School added. "I thought this would be a good experience."

The Deer Valley Education Foundation provides scholarships for two Deer Valley students and also presents two runners-up with savings bonds.

After presenting essays and letters of recommendation, Jenifer and Jason wove their way through the screening process to end up in front of DVEF board members for interviews.

Both indicated they were nervous, but successfully managed to answer questions such as if they had been to camps or away from home before and why they enjoy school.

After receiving "congratulations" letters from DVEF members, Jason and Jenifer ventured to a DVUSD Governing Board meeting to accept their scholarships.



Jason Hoover and Jenifer O'Neil attended U.S. Space Camp in Huntsville, Ala., last month. The two won scholarships from the Deer Valley Education Foundation after they wrote essays about why they wanted to attend Space Camp.

Photo by **Heidi Hougham**/Independent

"I really want to thank the DVEF and my teacher Mr. Shoop who recommended this to me," Jenifer said.

"I also would like to thank DVEF and Mr. Mur, my teacher," Jason said.

Once at Space Camp, memories of essays and oral interviews vanished as the students immersed themselves in everything space.

Each morning the campers met at 8 a.m. for "mission briefings." For example, on one mission, Jenifer was a station commander.

"I sat behind the pilot," she said. "I helped dock the orbiter to the space station."

In other missions, Jenifer worked on a telescope and helped destroy a satellite.

Campers learned how astronauts worked and lived in space, and manipulated controls and equipment similar to what is actually used in space.

"I liked the moon walk," Jason said. "You got to do different hops and pretty much learned how to walk on the moon."

He also enjoyed working with mission control and donning space suits to construct things for the space station.

Another of Jenifer's favorite activities at camp was the "space shot," which shot campers straight into the air and let them free fall.

"It drops you in a free fall and there is about three seconds of microgravity," she said.

In addition to gaining insightful astronaut experience, the pair made worldwide friends.

"There were people there from all over the world," Jason said. "There was a girl in our group from England. You can make friends from everywhere."

Jason's mother, Debbie, accompanied the two to Alabama. She also attended the graduation ceremony.

"There were some really nice speeches at the ceremony," Ms. Hoover said. "They all hope the kids walk away with better understanding of NASA in hopes it encourages them to pursue a career in the space program. They are the future."

Jenifer's mother, Roz, believes the experience benefited the pair in many ways.

"It was a great experience," she said. "It was really interesting for them to be able to meet other people."

Jenifer and Jason will present their experiences to the DVUSD Governing Board at a regular board meeting. They also will speak to their schools about the camp.