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Teacher enjoys bringing space into classroom

BY KELLI KNUDSEN
Journal Staff

Reaching for the stars is more than just an expression to Rosholt science teacher Cindy Byers; it's a way of life -- and a way of teaching.

Byers always has been intrigued by space and has been sharing her love of all things extraterrestrial with her students for years.

She said a lot of kids come into her class thinking that being an astronaut is the only way to be involved in space exploration. She introduces them to areas such as engineering and research that also play major roles at places like NASA.

"I really try to expose kids to lots of other opportunities that they may not know about," Byers said.

Besides being something that is required, space education is beneficial because it gives kids more than just what they learn in textbooks, said Eric Brunsell, director of education programs at Space Education Initiatives.

"It shows them firsthand how science is being applied on a daily basis," he said.

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Last week, Byers travelled to Pasadena, Calif., for a workshop at the NASA Jet Propulsion Lab, Deep Space Network and the Dryden Flight Research Center that was given by Space Education Initiatives, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to using space exploration to engage students in science, math and technology.

The Jet Propulsion Lab has built many parts of space probes now exploring the solar system such as the Mars Rover and the New Horizons mission that recently launched for Pluto.

"It's basically the heart of NASA's solar system exploration efforts," Brunsell said.

"It was fascinating," Byers said. "Because we're able to talk to scientists who are actually doing the science, I learned a great amount in a short amount of time."

In order to participate in workshops offered by Space Education Initiatives, teachers fill out an application and write essays describing how they currently use space education in their curriculum and how they plan to incorporate new information.

Byers has been to several workshops with Space Education Initiatives. Brunsell said her applications continue to be accepted because she uses what she learns in her classroom with enthusiasm.

"First of all, we can tell she's just a phenomenal teacher by the way she works with kids and the innovative things she does in the classroom. She has a lot of energy," he said.

Byers teaches a unit about Mars with her seventh-grade class that covers how missions like the Mars Rover work with a computer program that lets the students simulate a mission to Mars.

"It's like they're in mission control," she said.

She also teaches a life science class where she incorporates space into a section about plants by teaching about plants that have been grown on the International Space Station. She also teaches about the effects on humans in space.

Byers helps teach a weeklong summer camp sponsored by Space Education Initiatives and the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, which teaches fifth-grade to high school students about rocketry, robotics and human space flight.

Byers said having firsthand experience with the subject that she teaches makes all the difference when teaching a subject that can seem so out-of-reach for young students.

"Kids get real excited when you talk about something and you say that you've talked to an engineer on the project. It makes it more personal to them," she said.

Byers also feels proud that she has had students go on to pursue engineering as a career.

"That's pretty exciting to feel like you are a part of that," she said, "at least exposing students to that career option."

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