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Middle School Students Reach for the Stars

A new exhibit at the SD Discovery Center in Pierre features pictures of the universe taken by Pierre and Kimball, SD middle school students as part of the Harvard Smithsonian YouthAstroNet (Youth Astronomy Network) program.

Three hundred middle school students from Georgia Morse and Kimball middle schools explored the universe with telescopes they controlled over the internet during a two-week project. The SD Discovery Center worked with the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics and four middle school teachers to bring this opportunity into local classrooms. The students from Rachel Hartmann's and Hope Armstrong's 6th grade classes from Georgia Morse Middle School, and Jenna and Drew Gillogly's 6-8th graders from Kimball Middle School were able to request images from the MicroObservatory Robotic Telescopes of different objects in our solar system and beyond. They then learned how to process the images using JS9 software to create their own astrophotographs.

"I was amazed to see how students that are usually quiet and struggle in class, found their voices and excelled at processing images." says Dr. Rhea Waldman, Education Director at the SD Discovery Center.

The project also included a video conference with an astrophysicist from the Harvard-Smithsonian. During the conference the students were able to learn more about the work of the scientist, what a typical day of an astrophysicist looks like, but also get to know the person behind the science.

"When we connect students to scientists, their tools and their processes they get excited about doing science. One of SDDC's jobs is to get kids and teachers excited about science. But even more important, these opportunities cause kids to better understand how and why we do science." says Kristie Maher, Executive Director of the SD Discovery Center. "Experiences like these make kids take science classes and dream about being scientists themselves."

The YouthAstroNet is an NSF-funded research project from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics to create and study a nationwide online learning community of middle school students, educators, and STEM mentors. The project aims to engage students in student driven, authentic STEM investigations through the use of remote-controlled telescopes from the MicroObservatory Network and hands-on activities. For more information and to control your own telescope visit:

<http://mo-www.cfa.harvard.edu/OWN/index.html>

The SD Space Grant Consortium, www.sdspacegrant.sdsmt.edu, funded the teachers' professional development activities within this experience. They became familiar with lessons and resources to replicate this activity and to use to supplement their science curriculum in the future. This training also

modeled the value of linking students with researchers and the current science in which they are involved.