



Camp blasts off for Stewartown children

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Children at Stewartown's summer camp are taking off with aeronautics through an academic program that teaches them the science and history of flight.

As part of a four-week learning project geared toward children from low- and moderate-income families, summer campers from first through ninth grades are learning flight facts, visiting NASA and constructing gliders and rockets as a way to get kids excited about flight.

"I want them to appreciate flight as more than an abstract concept," said Benjamin Freedman, education technologist for the Community Preservation and Development Corp. CPDC is a nonprofit agency that coordinates projects for Stewartown, a townhouse community composed of public housing managed by the Housing and Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County.

"This is stuff they typically wouldn't get in school -- but it can be inspiring."

The students are learning about the Wright brothers and basic concepts of gravity, wind and rocketry through class discussions, readings and experiments. Each week the classes have a building day, where they put together kits of model planes and gliders, and they take field trips to flight-friendly centers, such as the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

On Tuesday, the group visited NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center.

"It's cool. NASA doesn't really let people in all the time," said Chase Peebles, 9. "We get to see stuff that other people probably couldn't."

Chase enjoys the summer camp because of the hands-on experiments, he said. Although he made paper airplanes in the past, he said that learning about the history of airplanes -- like how the Wright brothers used bicycle parts to construct their first aircraft -- has made him more interested in flight.

"That's our main goal -- to give kids exposure to things that they ordinarily wouldn't have exposure to," said Keisha Jones, educator for the fourth- through ninth-grade group.

The campers also use computers to look up space terms, play science games and skim over Web sites that deal with aeronautics.

One of the most important lessons in the curriculum is the influence of women and African Americans in flight, she said.

"Minorities and women played a major role in what flight has become today," Jones said. "We want them to know ... that it's something in history that many different people were a part of."

The summer camp is in its third year, although the aeronautics theme is a first, Freedman said. The children receive breakfast and lunch through a county summer food service program, and the second half of the day is filled with sports and activities.

At the culmination of the camp during the end of July, campers will construct model rockets and set them off at a barbecue. It won't be the first time they launched into flight.

Thirteen-year-old Jersia Jones was surprised to learn that many women were involved in flying and constructing aircrafts, she said.

"Now that I learned that, I feel like I could be a female pilot," she said. "If they could do it back then, I can do it, too."