

SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH: Pottstown's Challenger Learning Center opens its doors to the public

Evan Brandt : 7-9 minutes : 8/28/2022

POTTSTOWN — You might think 10 months is a little young to start someone on a career path, but that didn't stop Tavonna Holly of Pottstown from giving her daughter Ra'Vonna a taste of space technology.

"As long as she's not on the rocket, I'm good with it," Holly joked as her daughter experimented with whether she could steer the spaceship with her feet.



There's little doubt about the theme of the Challenger Learning Center left in the mind of visitors walking through the front door.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

The pair were part of the crowd that converged on Riverfront Park Saturday for the grand opening of the Challenger Learning Center, one of many across the country but the only one in Pennsylvania.

And although a 10-month-old may seem a little young for such exposure, it's not by all that much.

The center is designed to inspire students in grades 5 through 8 with hands-on experience with the technology used in space missions. It has partnered with Montgomery County Community College to open the center in the college's building in Riverfront Park with a particular focus on students from the Pottstown and Norristown school districts.

"We want them to see themselves reflected in a possible future career," said Annalise Giuliani, one of two "flight directors" at the center and who previously worked for NASA at the Johnson Space Center in Texas.



Anjuli Aker, left, and Annalise Giuliani, right meet with Ryan Oxenford, director of curriculum and education programs for

the Pottstown School District, during an open house held Friday.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

She and Anjuli Aker don blue flight suits and take students and visitors on a simulated launch, and then into a “module” where they are assigned teams and work to accomplish the kinds of tasks real astronauts undertake in space. There is also a mission control center for those who would like to keep their space-themed experience on this plant.

“We can’t ask for a better place to do this,” Aker of the Pottstown location.

“In our first year, we plan to service 7,000 students with a strong focus in Pottstown and Norristown school districts,” Vicktoria Bastecki-Perez, president of Montgomery County Community College, said during Friday’s ribbon-cutting. “We will provide equity and opportunity for all.”



The ribbon on the new Challenger Learning Center in Pottstown was cut on Friday.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

Noting that the center benefitted from a PA Smart Grant of \$500,000, a \$70,000 subsidy from NASA and \$191,000 in funding from the Montgomery County Economic Development Corp., Bastecki-Perez said the center’s mission is to “transform and lead the next generation’s destiny and future.”

Quoting Christa McAuliffe, the New Hampshire teacher who was killed on Jan. 28, 1986, when the Challenger shuttle broke apart at 48,000 feet —78 seconds after launch, Bastecki-Perez said simply: “Space is for everyone.”



The appropriately attired Evan Nagarian, 9, and his father Chris drove from Skippack for the Saturday grand opening of the Challenger Learning Center in Pottstown.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

“Within weeks of that tragedy, the families of the crew members killed came together and took their grief and directed their love” into founding the Challenger Centers, said Lance Bush, president and CEO of Challenger Centers. now in 30 states and which have reached six million students. Family members of the lost crew remain on their board of directors to this day, he said.

Many Challenger Center alums have gone on to successful careers in the space industry, including Blue Origin, the private space agency



A Challenger Learning Center staffer demonstrates one of the work tasks visiting students are asked to undertake.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

The connection between Challenger Learning Centers and NASA remains strong. By happy coincidence, the grand opening occurred just two days before [NASA's planned launch of Artemis 1](#), the most powerful rocket ever built, on 1.3 million miles, 42-day journey around the moon.

Prior to the opening, [a summer camp visit by Janet's Planet](#) introduced the first set of students to the center and Skippack resident Evan Nagarian, 9, was one of them. He returned, eagerly, in a space suit Saturday for another visit.



Shehad Parvez and her daughter Maryam, 6, try the controls of one of the space module work stations Saturday during the opening of the Challenger Learning Center.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

Also on hand was Maryam Parvez, 6, from Plymouth Meeting. She was there with her family and shyly reported the activity station she was sharing with her mother Shehad to be “fun,” when asked by a reporter.



Reid Jellesma, standing, advises his cousin Harrison Reid on how to pilot the launch module safely into space dock Saturday.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

And the tasks, both in space and Pottstown, are not easy. Just ask Reid Jellesma, 9 of Elverson, and his cousin Harrison Irons, also 9, from Morgantown. Despite ample advice from each other, neither managed to successfully dock the space capsule with the orbiting science research module within the allotted period.



Visitors to the Challenger Learning Center in Pottstown sit through a simulated rocket launch. (Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

But before they even get to the workstations, visitors are strapped into metal chairs for a simulated launch. In front of them, a large screen shows the rocket launching, shedding stages and preparing to dock with the orbiting research module.

Organizers hope this virtual launch experience will lead to the actual launch of careers in STEM fields, particularly for students in underserved communities.



The various work stations in the space module are explained during one of the many tours run Saturday for the opening of the Challenger Learning Center in Pottstown. (Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)

“Students of this generation are digital natives, so they are already exposed to technology,” said Bush. “We have to give them a realistic experience of the technology they will encounter. They have to see themselves doing it because, frankly, we need for them to do it.”

“That’s why we look for partners who understand the need for STEM and who care deeply about education and the next generation. And we found the perfect partner in Montgomery County Community College,” said Bush.

“NASA is going back to the moon and the next step is to someday step onto the surface of our red neighbor, Mars,” said Kevin Orangers, Director of Educational Engagement & Innovation, Montgomery County Community College. “It is our hope that one of the students we inspire may one day design the new propulsion system that gets us there, or is one of those who take that first step onto another world.”



To understand the desire of Challenger Learning Centers to inspire the next generation of scientists, one need merely read the writing on the wall.(Evan Brandt — MediaNews Group)