

The Lower Hudson Valley

Travel through outer space or stay behind at mission control? That's the choice available to participants in a simulated journey that's probably the next best thing to a NASA space flight.

On the third Sunday of each month, the Lower Hudson Valley Challenger Center (LHVCC) in Airmont, N.Y., conducts simulations known as "public missions." The idea is to educate kids ages 9 and up about space science through hands-on experience.

The Center offers missions to the moon, to Mars and to

a comet. Families, school groups, corporations and scout troops all are welcome at the Center, which also offers special birthday party missions and camp adventures.

An Educational Experience

When I first suggested the Challenger Center to my kids, ages 12 and 6, the Disney ride "Mission to Mars" was immediately mentioned. I must admit, I can't blame them for making the comparison, but in all honesty, a visit to the Challenger Center is so much more than a thrilling ride. It's a complete educational experience that gives everyone the chance to become an astronaut, if only for a short while.

The Airmont facility is one of more than 50 Challenger Centers across the U.S. and around the world established in memory of the seven astronauts who died on the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986. All of the facilities are run by the Challenger Center for Space Science Education, which seeks to inspire and motivate children to take an interest in math, science and technology.

Preparing for our Mission

To prepare for our "Rendezvous with a Comet" mission, we were told to imagine ourselves in the year 2036 aboard a small and maneuverable spacecraft. Our job was to perform the necessary tasks to rendezvous with and collect material from Comet Encke, an actual comet named after its discoverer Johann Franz Encke, a German astronomer.

After donning blue NASA flight suits and receiving our assignments from the specially-trained flight directors, it was time to separate into two groups. One group boarded the spacecraft, while the other remained at mission control. Half-way through the simulation the groups switched, giving visitors an opportunity to experience the mission from both perspectives.

All participants were assigned to special tasks that mirrored various duties of a typical space mission, including collecting data, assembling space probes, monitoring the health of the astronauts on board, and conducting research. So, while half of the Connolly family was busy navigating the spacecraft on one side of the room, my daughter and I checked the air pressure and relative humidity of the cabin, among other tasks.

The spacecraft model, while similar to an orbiting space station, was a user-friendly environment with paper and pencils at hand to jot down notes. All equipment was clearly labeled so as not to get confused, and each team was provided with a notebook of detailed instructions to help carry out the mission successfully. The Learning Center

representatives were also nearby, ready to answer questions at any time.

Be Prepared for Amazing Discoveries (and Emergencies, too!)

Once the mission reached full throttle, there was a flurry of activity both at mission control and at the space station. The teams were busy sending email back and forth, and everyone was working at full capacity to ensure our mission's goals were achieved.

But just like a regular mission, our journey was not entirely smooth sailing. At one point, the general alarm went off and the rotating alert-beacon demanded our attention. The humidity levels were low and the entire mission was in danger due to a build-up of static electricity. To prevent the spacecraft's equipment from malfunctioning, it was our job as life-support specialists to eliminate the static problem by gathering the crew together and asking that they hold on to several grounding bars located throughout the cabin.

Perhaps the mission's most exciting "discovery" was the navigation crew's detection of a completely different comet from the one we had originally been seeking. We were able to launch a probe that would enable the astronauts to further examine this new "snowball" in space. To celebrate, we named our discovery the "Challenger Comet."

Overall, our day at the Challenger Center was a fulfilling one. My kids know more about the amazing jobs that NASA scientists must do to launch a successful mission, and they also discovered something else: that teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving are essential elements to every successful mission, be it space exploration or life's everyday tasks. ♦

Colette Connolly is a Westchester-based freelance writer who likes to explore new and interesting things.

When You Go...

Lower Hudson Valley Challenger Learning Center

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Airmont, N.Y. 10901
www.lhvcc.com
845-357-3416

Admission

\$20, children under 5 are free. Reservations required for individual, family or group visits.

Other Programs at the LHVCC

The LHVCC also runs LEGO workshops for children in first through fifth grades, and a LEGO Robotics program for children in fourth through eighth grades. After-school rocketry classes and workshops are also available through The Challenger Center Rocket Club, which meets once a month.

Your family can be part of a NASA mission at The Lower Hudson Valley Challenger Center in Airmont, New York.