

Comal Independent School District

NEWS RELEASE

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SVHS students save astronauts from danger

The lives of astronauts aboard Space Shuttle Discovery and International Space Station were put into the hands of some Smithson Valley High students recently.

Despite a potentially deadly solar flare, the SVHS students came through in the clutch to save the crew of both spaceships.

The reason for the student participation wasn't because of massive budget cutbacks at NASA, but instead it was a highly interactive videoconference.

During the videoconference "Space Station Alpha" students in Misti Thueson's AP environmental science class split into five teams that focused on communications, crisis management, the solar storm, radiation, and life support.

For nearly 90 minutes in the simulation, each team read and analyzed data that was fed straight to their laptop computers.

Members of each team then had to report to a flight director at Mission Control, who gave them a very short window of time to complete each task. With every passing minute the situation became more stressful.

"This makes you think quicker and use your problem solving skills," said student Bram Villarreal. "There's absolutely no room for error."



The students were not only able to see Mission Control commander Lori Kudlak live, but they also witnessed Discovery blast into space and watched the inside of the International Space Station on a large screen. They then directed the astronauts where to go to escape radiation during the simulation.

“I didn’t know what to expect, but this is very cool,” said student Max Kellogg. “It’s a lot different than sitting in class taking notes. It’s very fast paced, but the pressure you’re under makes you realize it’s important to get things right. I think it’s a great learning tool.”

Despite the fact they faced many nail-biting moments along the way, including water vapor build-up and powerful doses of potentially fatal x-rays and protons from the solar flare, the SVHS students saved the lives of each of the men and women in space.

Just like in a scene from “Apollo 13,” everyone in the class cheered and high-fived when they heard the news.

“These students got to go from a science class where you learn about solar flares to making decisions based on that knowledge in a real life situation,” said Sharon Spinks, Comal ISD instructional technology coordinator. “They were analyzing data and anticipating problems based on what they learned. It’s great to watch this engaged learning where everybody is contributing and collaborating.”

Thueson thought her class did an excellent job during the simulation.

“They got to see that all these numbers and levels we’ve been talking about in science class are truly vital to survival,” Thueson said. “When you put them in a situation like this it makes it very real.”

Comal ISD instructional media specialist Jennifer Wivagg took part in the videoconference at a workshop this summer. She won a drawing for the school district to receive four free videoconferences from Emissions worth \$550 each.

“This is probably one of the best videoconferences in the country,” Wivagg said. “It’s fun and energizing, combines curriculum with technology, and interaction with an outside expert.”

A class at Canyon High School will take part in a similar videoconference, and classes at Timberwood Park and Arlon Seay elementary schools will also participate in one geared to their age group later this semester.

IN PHOTOS: Smithson Valley High students Corey Starasinic from the Storm Team and Valerie Tovar from the Communication Team give Mission Control commander Lori Kudlak an update on x-ray levels during videoconference "Space Station Alpha."

Radiation Team members Libby Defries (left) and Darice Chavira analyze data crucial to the survival of astronauts aboard Space Shuttle Discovery and International Space Station during a videoconference simulation at Smithson Valley High.

Smithson Valley High Communication Team members Jenna Rae Housson (left) and Valerie Tovar discuss strategy on exactly where the safest place the astronauts can go to shield themselves from powerful doses of potentially fatal x-rays and protons during videoconference "Space Station Alpha."

Communication Team members (l-r) Valerie Tovar, Amanda Tucker, and Shelby Mecke see first hand via videoconference the sun's potentially deadly solar flares that are proving to be a major threat during "Space Station Alpha" at Smithson Valley High.



