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Virginia Run students speak to space station

By: Layla Wilder
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There was static as the children of Virginia Run Elementary School sat on the gym floor, yearning for a response from space last Friday. "NAISS, this is K4HTA, over," Peter Norloff, a member of the Vienna Wireless Society, said into the microphone. Silence.

The tension rose. Parents took time off work to be there. The students decorated the school hallways and designed space mission patches for the event.

Thirteen children prepared questions to ask Sunita Williams, a member of the Expedition 14 crew team on the International Space Station.

They stood ready to speak into the hand held microphone. That is, if they established contact.

Norloff, who worked for hours with fellow ham radio enthusiasts and Fairfax County Public School's technology team to put antennas on the school and set up channels for communication, tinkers with the dials of the transmitter. "NAISS this is K4HTA, over."

"Hello, Virginia Run Elementary. It's good to hear you," Williams said.

Smiles. Sighs of relief all around. Children lean towards the front of the room.

"How high above the earth are you? Over," Nicholas Feldman, 6, said. 200 to 250 miles above the earth. About the distance between Washington D.C. and New York, Williams responded.

Liliana Canales, 12, asked what kind of research Williams is working on.

The crew is looking at "what happens to the human body in space so that we can keep people in space for a longer time," Williams said.

Donny Waymire, 10, asked what sorts of things Williams is doing to help International Space Station expeditions.

Research that will help your generation get to the moon, was the answer.

"And say hi to your mom and dad for me," Williams said.

Through the Amateur Radio in the International Space Station project, crews gets talk with schools across the world on ham radio.

Three schools in the United States and 40 schools across the world get to connect but the application process can take months and acceptance is rare.

Virginia Run got lucky because of an old friendship.

Waymire's parents served as Eavy pilots with Williams about 15 years ago. Linda was Williams' roommate while they were on duty and Williams wanted the Waymire children's school to be one of her picks.

"I would never have believed 15 years ago that she would be talking to my children from space," Linda Waymire said after the event.

Shea Megale, 11, the school's student body president, took the microphone to say goodbye. "We wish you and your Expedition 14 crew mates well. Over," she said.

"Thank you!!," the rest of the student body shouted before the signal went dead.

The eyes of the chosen 13 were still shining when they gathered in the school's library for refreshments and to get a picture of them talking into the radio.

With his picture in hand, Bahman Patel, 12, said "asking the questions and listening to the answers" was the most exciting thing about the opportunity for him.

This was very special opportunity for her boy who has always wanted to be a pilot, said Hoofi Patel, his mother.

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