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NASA's Virtual Outreach Programs Set to Engage Virgin Islands Students in STEM Learning Next Week; Registration For Participation Still Open

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Astronaut suit in Cape Canaveral Florida USA By. GETTY IMAGES

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) will be offering a virtual outreach program for Virgin Islands students and teachers throughout next week. This event will be sponsored by UVI's Math and Science Department in collaboration with the UVI Cooperative Extension Service.

Genger Benson Perez, a NASA Exploration Ground Systems Education (EGS) and outreach specialist, spoke to the Consortium about the program and said that students will be exposed to a range of topics that include but are not limited to the Artemis Mission, NASA's program to return

astronauts to the Moon by 2024, preparing the way for human missions to Mars, and Orion, NASA's next great vehicle that will be launched in 2021. The Artemis Mission incorporates NASA's plan to land the first American female astronaut on the moon.

There will be presenters from different areas in NASA including one working on Orion, and one each from the EGS and Space Launch Systems (SLS) departments.

These programs have taken place in the USVI since 2015, with the only exception being Jan. 2018 after Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

"They (students) are going to learn a lot, they are going to learn about some of the things that are going to reinforce what they are learning in their classrooms about science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), as well as getting to know some NASA employees," said Ms. Benson Perez.

Michelle Peterson, interim dean of college of math and sciences at UVI, spoke to the Consortium about the value of participating in these programs for children and said, "It gives students an opportunity to see for themselves what STEM is really about."

Ms. Peterson's message to students that are unsure if they should participate, was, "You will regret what you don't do more than what you do do. What's the worst that can happen and what's the best that can happen? The downsides are few and the upsides are incredible."

She thinks that there is a major misconception that STEM is intimidating, and that the best way to learn that this is false is to try it and meet people with careers in STEM fields.

The week-long program will have a day dedicated to each age group. It will kick-off on Monday with information for 1st-3rd graders. On Tuesday the session will be geared toward students in grades 4-6. Wednesday's focus will be on the 7th and 8th graders. Thursday will be directed toward grades 9 and 10, while the week of activities will wrap up on Friday with sessions for 11th and 12th graders.

There will be daily sessions each day at 9 a.m, 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Each day's sessions will share similar information so students only need to attend one per age group.

If parents and teachers encourage their students to attend the session, NASA will provide supplemental resources and fun activities that can keep students engaged after the presentations.

On Tuesday night there will be a "Sip and Stem" event for college students and graduating high school seniors. On Wednesday night there will be a similar event for teachers and counselors. Both of these events will take place from 5-6 p.m.

Tuesday night's session will have a former NASA intern from Puerto Rico that went on to get hired by NASA. This individual will talk to students about how they can transition from island life to a job at NASA by utilizing different outreach programs and opportunities.

Hugh Arnold, a teacher at All Saints that will have his classes participate in the program and has participated in the past, expressed confidence that the program will have a direct impact on his students' future. In a phone interview with the Consortium, Mr. Arnold said, "It's great exposure for the students to gain a greater interest in STEM, and the future is in STEM. The more we can inspire the students to get into the sciences, the better off they are going to be in the future — that's where the jobs will be."

Mr. Arnold added, "It is really important for us to place as much emphasis on STEM as possible and increase student interest."

David Morris, UVI physics associate professor and Etleman space director, formerly worked at NASA Goddard and knows firsthand how Virgin Islanders can get career opportunities through NASA's relationship with the territory. He was instrumental in sending students to internships at the NASA Goddard Institute in 2013. Due to the success of the first two students, UVI's and NASA's relationship has grown to the point where UVI students have been able to intern at NASA centers across the United States. UVI has sent as many as eight students to NASA centers in one summer.

For older students, this program is beneficial because "visiting with the NASA folks will open their eyes to what future possibilities there is with NASA," said Mr. Morris. His message to parents with younger students was that if you think your child may ever be interested in STEM, this is a way to get them engaged.

Mr. Morris explained that this engagement program along with other STEM programs in the territory can help guide children interested in STEM through high school and college into a career locally or on the mainland. One of the more recent programs that UVI is offering is physics with a concentration in engineering. This program can help develop students' skills that will set them up for success in a STEM career.

"We're training students not necessarily to go be engineers at NASA; we're focusing on training students not just to go get careers in the states, we are developing pathways into jobs in the territory," Mr. Morris said. "We have students that graduated UVI and went to work in the territory and that's the real focus in the engineering concentration."

The most rewarding part about this NASA outreach program for Mr. Morris is seeing kids at schools that he doesn't get the opportunity to visit often, and meeting them as UVI students that are interested in STEM topics.

The virtual sessions will be held on Microsoft Teams and RSVP is required. Registration is still available for these programs and interested persons can contact Christina Chanes by email christina.chanes@uvi.edu, or at her office at 340-693-1072.

Ms. Chanes is a big reason that this program is the Virgin Islands. "Christina has been incredibly critical in all of these productions and getting everything set up, and spearheading the organization of this the last few years," said Mr. Morris.

Mr. Arnold, the All Saints educator, said, "I'm excited that it can still take place even though it is a super unique school year... Luckily we're able to use the technology that's available to us."

Ms. Benson Perez made sure to say, "NASA loves the USVI, we love the students, the teachers and the university so we hope that they all come out and we're excited to come virtually and look forward to the day we can come back physically."

"We would love to get some employees and engineers from the islands," she added before ending her interview with the Consortium.

The same tone was echoed by Ms. Peterson when she said, "I really appreciate the efforts that all the people involved with the NASA EPSCOR (Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research) to make this possible, and I don't think they get thanked enough and it's deeply, deeply

appreciated.”

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