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STEM outreach key to uniting Airmen with students

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – A group of Airmen – military and civilian alike – traveled to Croton Elementary School in Melbourne, Fla., Feb. 7 to serve as Science Fair judges.

Eighteen members of the Air Force Technical Applications Center here volunteered to examine more than 200 projects put together by 4th, 5th and 6th grade students and evaluate them based on their creativity, scientific thought, skill, clarity, thoroughness and knowledge gained.



Students were able to choose a topic from three basic categories: physical, environmental or biological. Once their topic was approved by their science teacher, they were required to employ the scientific method by forming a hypothesis, gathering the needed materials, developing a procedure, conducting the experiment, recording the results and ultimately drawing a conclusion of their findings.

Croton Science Fair Coordinator Stacy Walsh gave each judge a rubric – a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring each entry – and the volunteers were divided up into small groups to review the tri-fold boards on display in the school's cafeteria.

The judges were then given the opportunity to interview each student to ask them about their methodology, the conclusions they drew from their experiments and how they came up with their hypothesis.

Brianna Laflamme, a 4th grader in Mrs. Roberts' class, impressed the judges with her project on what types of food ants are attracted to. Master Sgt. Michael Nolan, Staff Sgt. Jordan Peterson and Diana Velosa asked the 9-year-old where she got the idea for her project.

"One day I saw a bunch of ants in our cabinet, and it got me to thinking about what kind of food they're attracted to," said Brianna. "So I thought it would be cool to set out different types of food to see what they'd be drawn to."

When the judges asked her if she was surprised with the outcome, she got a big smile on her face and said, "I really never thought they'd go towards the jalapeno, but they did!"

Walsh, who has been an educator for more than 23 years, is in her third year at Croton, and her first year being in charge of the Science Fair.

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“The students have been working on their projects pretty much since September,” the 6th grade math and science teacher explained. “At the beginning of the school year, they were given folders with background information about the program and a basic layout of what will be required of them when it comes time to put their boards together. When the students returned to school after the winter break, that’s when students really started putting more energy and attention into their projects with the help of their teachers and family members.”



Jarvienis Rosario, another member of Mrs. Roberts’ 4th grade class, hypothesized on whether the color of M&M candies would fade if placed in a cup of vinegar.

“This was so much fun!” she exclaimed. “Last year in 3rd grade we had to do a group class project and I loved doing it. So this year I was so excited because I knew I was going to be able to do a project on my own.”

Jarvienis was interviewed by Airman 1st Class Ruben Vera-Colon and Senior Airman Harold Fisher Jr. The Airmen were intrigued by her concept and wanted to know about the outcome of her efforts.

“Before I did the actual experiment, I didn’t think the vinegar would affect the M&Ms at all,” she told the judges, “but after I put them in the cups, I saw all the color fade off of them. It was exciting and surprising!”

When asked what she wants to be when she grows up, she declared, “I’m going to be a science teacher because I love doing stuff like this!”

Jennifer Kelly had a very personal reason for volunteering to serve as a judge.

“I graduated from Croton in 1996 and my son went to school here as well, so it seemed like a perfect opportunity for me to give back,” Kelly said. “I teamed up with my co-worker Carmen Bigas and we judged projects done by the 5th graders. It brought back a lot of memories of my time spent at the school, and of when I put together my own Science Fair project. It’s always very rewarding when you can give back to the community. I really enjoyed myself and hope I can be a part of it again next year.”

In addition with being proud of the hard work and effort the students devoted to their projects, Walsh was equally impressed with the AFTAC volunteers.

“The people from Patrick have been so incredibly accommodating and paid such close attention to the small details, like bending down to meet eye-to-eye with the students, showing an incredible amount of patience while speaking with some of our more shy children, and providing such positive feedback on the scoring sheets so each student would be able to read something good about their project from each judge,” Walsh said.

She added, “The kids also were given the chance to meet real scientists and people they can look up to and possibly emulate later in life. I can’t say enough about the men and women from AFTAC. We’re indebted to them.”

This is the sixth year AFTAC has participated in Croton’s annual Science Fair.