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STARBASE takes students into the future

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - The STARBASE Academy has a name reminiscent of astronauts and spaceports out of some science fiction movie.

That is well and good because STARBASE has its eyes on the future. The nationwide program is funded by the Department of Defense with an aim to get fifth grade students interested in science, technology, engineering and mathematics — the STEM fields which are producing the high paying jobs of the 21st century and which happen to be crucial to our national defense.

The California National Guard Youth and Community Programs Youth Task Force operates two STARBASE Academies. More than 52,000 California fifth-graders have attended since the Cal Guard opened its first STARBASE in Sacramento in 1993. The second opened in Los Alamitos in May 2013.

“STARBASE was one of the highlights of my elementary school years,” said Daniel Torrecampo, 19, who attended the program in Sacramento in 2006 as a fifth-grader. “I remember I had an interest in planes but STARBASE really sealed the deal for me.”

When he attended STARBASE, he built rockets, learned how to design structures using computer aided design software and attempted to build a crash-proof space shuttle that had a raw egg for a pilot. His shuttle was launched into a wall from a zip line.

“My egg cracked,” he said. “It didn’t survive.”

Today, Torrecampo is a sophomore at the University of California, Davis, where he is double majoring in aerospace engineering and mechanical engineering.

Torrecampo said he had an interest in aviation before he participated in the STARBASE program. “I didn’t really take action until after I attended STARBASE,” he said.

After finishing the program, his interest in aviation continued to grow. He kept his grades up, founded a remote control airplane club and got accepted into UC Davis. Today, in between his engineering studies, he is involved in a college aerospace club. Once he graduates college, he hopes to pursue a career in the aerospace industry, possibly building rockets or designing fighter jets.

“STARBASE was initiated when it was discovered that the United States was not producing enough citizens in STEM-related fields,” said Lt. Col. Denise Varner, who oversees the STARBASE program for the California National Guard. “The reason that STARBASE targets fifth-graders is because that is the age when students decide whether they will pursue STEM-related studies and careers.”

“The main point right now is to get kids while they’re young excited about STEM,” said Judi Callnon, a credentialed teacher who teaches at STARBASE in Sacramento. “The program is very high energy. It’s very hands on and the kids get excited.”

Eva Turner, a fifth-grade teacher at Prairie Elementary School in Elk Grove, said the program helps her students put the future in focus by getting them to think about college and career options, including the military.

“To say my students enjoy STARBASE would be an understatement,” Turner said. “Every minute of every class, they are engaged in learning more about science and STEM. Even students that have underperformed in our regular classroom are retaining a great amount of information learned at STARBASE.”

Farheen Faruk, 20, attended STARBASE in Sacramento in 2004. Today, she is a psychology major with a minor in biology at the University of Redlands in Redlands, Calif.

“We didn’t have science programs at my school,” Faruk said. “After going to STARBASE, I realized I really like science. If I hadn’t gone, I wouldn’t have realized how much I liked it. I was exposed to the fun part of science and I learned that there is something out there that I want to do.”

She said before going to STARBASE, she had no intention of going to college or pursuing a STEM career. Once she completes a bachelor’s degree, she plans to earn a Ph.D. in physical therapy. And she’s thinking about joining the Air National Guard.

“It’s really important to know math and science,” she said. “I realized that I have to do well and have to get good grades. After STARBASE, I started to do really well and now here I am in college.”

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