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NAVAL AIR STATION MERIDIAN, Miss. (NNS) -- Fifth-grade students who attend Starbase Atlantis on board Naval Air Station (NAS) Meridian, Miss. not only get to select their own "call sign," they get to build a rocket and at the end of the five-day program, launch it in celebration of their accomplishments.

"This is the coolest class ever," said Tavia Griffin, one of 20 students from Harris Elementary in Meridian who graduated from the program Oct. 23. "My call sign is Gravity and I love science even more after this week."

Her friend Marcedias Donwell, call sign "Destiny," said math is now her favorite subject. "We learned so much this week and got to do fun things. We had to use math to determine the time it was take our robot to travel from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and we were the first to figure it out."

Starbase Atlantis Meridian opened its doors Oct. 23, 2002. To date, Starbase Atlantis Meridian has served more than 6,000 students in the public school system in Lauderdale County and Meridian during their fifth-grade year. The Meridian site also serves local private and parochial schools at times when the public schools are not able to attend. The curriculum highlights 60 percent of both state math and science objectives.

Special guests in attendance at the celebration were Keith Washington, director of program operations for Starbase Atlantis who traveled to Meridian from Florida, Capt. Charles C. Moore II, commanding officer of NAS Meridian, and Capt. David Lobdell, commodore of Training Air Wing 1.

Dr. Alvin Taylor, superintendent of Meridian Public Schools was also in attendance.

"This program is like a fun, educational space camp for our children who otherwise may not have the opportunity to have this experience," Taylor said. "The program has our full support."

Superintendent of Education for Lauderdale County School, Randy Hodges, echoed Taylor's support of the program.

"Students are receiving a quality experience when they attend Starbase Atlantis. We are impressed with the entire set up of the program and are confident that Lauderdale County students are more knowledge about math and science when they leave here."

Starbase Atlantis Meridian is one of 76 Department of Defense program located on National

Guard, U.S. Navy, Marine and Air Force bases worldwide. Meridian's program is one of 15 programs operated by the U.S. Navy. NAS Meridian is also the host military facility for the Starbase Atlantis Program on the Choctaw Indian Reservation - one of only four Native American Outreach Programs in the U.S.

The program is designed to serve youth by providing training opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). This is accomplished through exciting hands-on activities taught by an enthusiastic, caring staff in a safe, stable environment.

Starbase Atlantis was first established at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla., and NAS Whiting Field in the fall of 1994. Fifth-grade students from selected schools attend classes on the Navy facility for five days. Summer programs are also offered for students, with priority seating for dependents of military personnel. More than 107,500 students and teachers have attended the Starbase Atlantis program nationwide.

Students build and launch model rockets, "fly" airplanes on flight simulator programs, perform science experiments, use CAD to design a lab module for the space station, and work in teams to save "Eggbert." Students watch their models come alive in the 3-D printer. STEM careers are explored as Navy and civilian volunteers assist instructors and act as positive role models for the students. Evaluation of program impact is based upon pre-test and post-test score comparisons and questionnaires returned from students, teachers, parents, and participating Navy personnel.

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By: Penny Randall, Naval Air Station Meridian Public Affairs

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