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Space camp simulates astronaut activities

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Kris Capps

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Teacher Marci Ward and her able assistant Eric Weis help Chase Mingleddorf, 8, and Dio Rowe, 7, make paper airplanes at Space Camp.

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FAIRBANKS — Space & Aviation Junior Camp just might be the best kept “camp” secret in Fairbanks. It’s fun, it’s frugal, and it’s only 40 minutes a week.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, from noon to 5 p.m., children between the ages of 6 and 12 are invited to come to the Pioneer Air Museum and learn about space and aviation. Cost is \$1 per session and it starts at the top of the hour during those times. It’s the same session, all week. But every week, the topic changes.

The camp instructor is expert Marci Ward, a teacher at Immaculate Conception School in Fairbanks. She also runs the Space and Science Club for elementary students at the school and serves as the teacher liaison for the Space Foundation. She’s the one who spearheads bringing NASA astronauts to Fairbanks. In fact, she’s already working on that for February 2017.

Ward loves introducing kids to space and aviation. This summer, she has some help from Eric Weis, 17, a Monroe High School senior.

"Ms. Ward was my teacher in third grade," he said. "We just kept in contact."

This year, he works at the Pioneer Air Museum and twice a week, he helps with camp activities. The day I was there, he helped youngsters make paper propellers and paper airplanes.

"This helps them learn the basics of flight," he said. "Lift, air current, things like that."

While he's not intending to pursue aviation as a career himself, he said he finds it all a very fascinating hobby. He's excited about what is to come in future sessions.

"We emulate conditions on the space station," he said. "We put screws into a block of wood and then the kids have to wear bulky gloves and unscrew them."

At another session, campers will propel themselves around in a wheelchair. Just like they do in the space station. Due to no gravity, they can't just walk around, he said.

"Everything is done with their arms," said Ward. "So they get the feeling of being in the international space station."

Students will also build a paper model of the space shuttle, that can fly.

At the end of every session, kids get a personal tour of the air museum and have the opportunity to climb into a helicopter and other aircraft.

This is the second summer for the Space & Aviation Junior Camp and it is becoming more and more popular. In just the first week, other camps put this 40-minute session on their own agendas, bringing groups to the camp. Ward loves that, but asks for counselors to call ahead so she has plenty of supplies for a group.

This camp runs from June 1 to Aug. 4. Someone else will fill in those last two weeks of July when Ward has to share her expertise at the ASRAE Camp at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Here are some of the future topics that will be covered at Space & Aviation Junior Camp.

There will be a week focusing on "Astronauts." Campers will sample astronaut ice cream and discover how astronauts eat in space.

They will learn about Space X Dragon.

"Plans are to use it to bring astronauts to the International Space Station soon," said Ward. "We'll also look at the Dream Chaser and make a model of it."

In future sessions, students will learn about Rosetta and Phileo, currently on a comet.

"We will make a comet too," she said. "The plan is to also study some astronomy."

Finally, students will learn more about Curiosity, the rover on Mars.

The enthusiasm of Instructor Ward and her young assistant is quite compelling.

Pioneer Air Museum sponsors the camp, located at Pioneer Park. For more information call 451-0037 or see www.pioneerairmuseum.org. You can also email Ward at wardmarci9@gmail.com.

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