

Camp introduces engineering to Decatur students

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What do water, post cards, sand and NASA have in common?

Elementary students learned the answer to that question this week at Decatur City Schools' engineering summer camps at Banks-Caddell Elementary School.

A portion of a 3M Foundation grant and a \$20 registration fee funded the morning and afternoon day camps for students who will be in fourth and fifth grades next year. Director Brenda Terry said 66 students from Decatur's 12 elementary schools attended.

"We're trying to teach them that technology is more than computers and electronics," Terry said. "We also want them to learn who engineers are and what they do."

Terry is a former Decatur teacher who works for The University of Alabama-Huntsville's Institute of Science Education. She helped the school system pilot the Engineering is Elementary curriculum during the past school year.

The camps feature guests from different engineering professions. Terry and teachers Jessica Lindsey and Christy Williams interspersed hands-on projects between the talks.

Marshall Jones of United Launch Alliance talked Monday about what a mechanical engineer does. The students also got a lesson on structures. They built a tower out of 100 3-by-5 note cards, tape and a ruler. The tower had to hold a Beanie Baby for five seconds.

Chestnut Grove Elementary School student Brooks Blaxton said the key to tower success was a good base.

NASA's Monsi Roman followed Tuesday with a presentation on environmental control life support systems for the space shuttles and the To the Moon and Beyond Program.

Leon Sheffield Elementary School student Wells Coleman, 9, said he enjoyed learning about the astronauts' living quarters in the shuttle and how they deal with the weightless environment.

"They like to play with their food when it floats in mid-air," Coleman said.

The students visited Wetlands Edge Environmental Center on Wednesday to get a lesson from Director Marc Slate on water filtration systems.

At Wetlands Edge, Slate showed them the variety of filtration systems that keep the fresh- and salt-water tank clean and the animal life alive. He talked about natural filtration materials like charcoal, sand and seaweed, how bacteria can help with filtration and the difference between natural and manmade filtration.

As part of their lesson, the students built a filtration system using items like a screen from a screen door, paper, napkins and sand.

3M sent environmental engineer Frederick Brown from its engineering lab Thursday to talk about water quality. Students conducted experiments and learned to test water.

Blaxton said he chose engineering camp over baseball camp. He said he believes he made a good choice because it will help him continue making good grades in school.

"I've never done something like this," Blaxton said. "It's been fun."



Students in Decatur City Schools' elementary engineering summer day camp visit the Wetlands Edge Environmental Center to study water-filtering methods. Banks-Caddell Elementary School teacher Jessica Lindsey points out the filters in a salt-water tank to student Cameron Kirkes.

Daily photo by Gary Cosby Jr.

