



## Challenger Learning Center reaches for the stars ...

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Once a week or so, someone wanders into the Challenger Learning Center for Science & Technology and says something akin to, "I've always seen this place and wondered what you do in here."

Executive Director Steve Otten is on a mission to make that question moot. In addition to providing an educational experience for 10,000 children every year, he wants the five-year-old Woodstock facility to be an educational center for McHenry County, as well as a Woodstock tourist and retail attraction.

The 53 Challenger Learning Centers were the brainchild of the families of the astronauts killed in the Challenger shuttle explosion Jan. 28, 1986. Not content with a monument or statue, they envisioned a place that would interest schoolchildren in space exploration, test their math and science skills and encourage teamwork. The first center opened in Houston in 1988; today, there are 51 centers in the United States, one in Canada and one in England.

The center's program is geared to fifth- and sixth-graders, but a variety of other grade levels visit every year. Children come to the Woodstock center from the local public schools all over Northern Illinois and as far away as Calumet City.

"Sweet," Otten said is the word he hears most often as they walk through the door. Part of the day is spent in a mission, attempting to build a probe and rendezvous with a comet. Students spend time working in the Space Station and in Mission Control and perform a specific job, such as navigation, life support or communication. They must work together for the mission to be successful and to deal with the emergencies that often crop up.

Otten said children commonly ask if the exercise was "real," and that indicates a successful experience.

When not in the mission, students spend time in the "Adventure" Center, rotating among games and activities that test their knowledge of the planets and teach them about everyday items that NASA first developed for use in the space program. This year, the center is adding a "Forces of Flight" exhibit to the center. Students also see a movie, created for IMAX theaters, about the international space station.

A national organization governs the Challenger Learning Centers and develops the educational programs for the missions. Commanders who lead the missions must be certified teachers. Currently, Otten has six teachers on staff, along with Windy Krepel, the lead teacher and education coordinator. The support from the national organization and the teachers' experience and expertise allow Otten to concentrate on what he does best. With a background in sales, he concentrates on finding ways to market the center and expand its mission.

Otten wants to broaden the educational offerings at Challenger to serve all of McHenry County. He hopes to organize a monthly lecture series and is planning the program for an October visit from retired astronaut Ken Reightler, a veteran of two joint U.S./Russian shuttle missions. The center already sponsors Family Science Nights on the first Friday of every month and runs several summer camps for a variety of ages. In the fall, the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry will run one of the Family Science Nights.

Part of Otten's desire to open the center to the public is strictly financial. While many of the Challenger Learning Centers are attached to museums or associations, the Woodstock facility is a stand-alone center and is responsible for its own funding. Dollars come from the school groups, private donations, summer camps, public programs and some government and public grants. The center raises additional money through birthday parties and corporate missions, rental of meeting space and allowing the general public to purchase time on the center's Boeing 737 flight simulator.

Otten has been forging a partnership with the Planetary Studies Foundation, a nonprofit organization that studies space and astronomy and goes on expeditions to gather meteorites. The foundation has the 10th largest collection of meteorites in the world and will soon be putting some of the collection on display at Challenger. In addition, the foundation brought the DuPont telescope, an 1882 telescope weighing 1,200 pounds to the center. Otten hopes to establish hours when the public can come in to see the center's gallery of pictures, examine the meteorites and enjoy a demonstration of the telescope.

In August, the center will open what Otten felt was a necessity from the day he interviewed for the job.

"Where's your gift shop?" he asked the interviewing committee. The members smiled and said, "We think we need a gift shop."

Located at the front of the building, the shop will offer T-shirts, space mobiles, astronaut ice cream and glow-in-the-dark Mars mud. By Christmas, Otten hopes to add high-end educational toys.

"I've always found the space program fascinating," said Otten, by way of explaining his decision two years ago to take "a major pay cut" and become the Challenger Learning Center's executive director. He produced a worn volume, held together with masking tape, from behind his desk. The book about the space program in the 1960s is titled, "We Came in Peace," and was a gift to Otten when he was a boy from his uncle.

Otten's interest in the space program, respect for the astronauts and interest in helping the Challenger Center increase its economic impact on Woodstock fuel his quest to open the center to the wider community.

"I want the Challenger Learning Center to be one other thing to do right off the Square," he said, "and we're taking steps to make that happen."