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One small salute for man...a Wooten youth dons a space suit. Olu Alemoru/Los Angeles Wave

Wooten youth center kids have a blast on 'Space Day'

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Fighter cockpit

A Wooten youth becomes a female top gun. Olu Alemoru/Los

Posted: Saturday, August 3, 2013 6:40 pm | Updated: 3:25 pm, Mon Aug 5, 2013.

By Olu Alemoru, Staff Writer | 0 comments

Kids at a local youth center got to experience some thrilling hands-on technological learning Aug. 2 — donning space suits and operating a mini mock-up Stealth Fighter Jet — when the Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center, 9106 S. Western Ave., hosted a free "Space Day."

Founded in 1990 by Myrtle Faye Rumph, the mother of Al Wooten, killed in a drive-by shooting the year before, the Wooten Center provides after-school summer, gang prevention and college readiness programs for more than 200 students annually.

Sponsored by the Wooten Center, the NASA Summer

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of Innovation Mini Grant program and Councilman Bernard Parks' Office, one block east of Western Avenue, 91st Street was turned into an exhibit space that featured an F-117 flight simulator, a lunar utility vehicle, a working scale model of the Mars Rover, a hovercraft and a space toilet.

At the same time, the center's sports court was turned into a mechanical racetrack as three high school teams from Riverside and Orange Counties unveiled their award-winning robots.

The event was attended by Wooten students enrolled in the "Exploring Engineering" NASA Summer of Innovation summer camp, parents, volunteers, center board members Scott Miller and Phillip G. York, as well as Rumph, the activity center founder.

Other participants included the Los Angeles Council of Black Professional Engineers, Educate CA, who provided college and career advice and the Iridescent science education program, which conducted hands-on engineering projects.

Unfortunately, there was a tinge of sadness with the news that the NASA Summer of Innovation program has fallen victim to budget cuts by the nationwide sequestration. There is a possibility that the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) program providing free curricula and staff training may be axed

next year.

Nevertheless, Naomi McSwain, executive director of the center, who dreamt up the idea for the Space Day after holding the NASA-backed engineering camp being held through Aug. 23, was upbeat as she kicked off the program in the morning.

"My heart is pretty full seeing the reaction from the kids," McSwain said later. "They came into the summer program saying I like science and now they want to be aerospace engineers. It was great seeing how enthused they were; we had a college table with information about what they need to get into those careers. I told three young boys about it and they immediately took off running [towards it]."

"Wow," she continued. "This is what I was hoping for. It's great when a plan comes together and when you have partners like NASA and the Black Professional Engineers it makes things easier. This is only beginning."

According to Ota Lutz, a STEM education specialist with the Pasadena-based Jet Propulsion Laboratory, they don't actually know exactly what specific programs are being cut and until they get a definitive list they will need to be careful of their future commitments.

"The Summer of Innovation project, which has been in effect for several years now, is in response to President Obama's 'Innovate to Educate' campaign," she said. "The idea is to help students be engaged in science, technology, engineering and math over the summer so that their brains stay active and they don't lose all the knowledge they gained during the course of the school year."

She added: "We do a lot of hands-on learning with the kids and the staff enjoy the learning too and that's great."

Channeling the enthusiasm of a big kid, Traveling Space Museum founder Ivor Dawson, who had great fun demonstrating the Multi-Axis Simulator, wants his youngsters to see it as just a normal part of their aspiration.

"We engage with Black engineers and Black scientists; people who can inspire kids of all races," said Dawson, who is being honored Aug. 17 with the NAACP's Rita Walters Award for boosting academic achievement amongst scholars that face barriers in the pursuit of education. "Kids say to me all the time like it's being at a theme park. We want them to have fun while they're exploring and learning. We'll never stop coming up with ways for kids to yell and scream and have the time of their life."

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