

## Summer Break? I Don't Think So.

### *Spring Branch artist helps striving students imagine a life on Mars*

Ask the kids of HouPrep how they're spending their summer and their answers might include an hour of homework every night, written essays every day, and a trip to Mars.

Okay, that last one is imaginary. But it's not as if they're not ready.

These middle school kids, residents of public housing, have demonstrated academic achievement in their Fifth Ward neighborhood schools. Rather than rest on their accomplishments this summer, they've chosen to attend Houston Preparatory Academy on the University of Houston campus to immerse themselves in math and language arts.



Houston Preparatory Academy students

And with the help of local artists and space engineers, they study what life might be like for the first humans who live on Mars. Then they apply what they learn to create a sensorium, a special place designed to nourish the senses of Earthlings on Mars.



Mullett

Spring Branch resident Joy Mullett, an active member of Houston Women's Caucus for Art (HWCA), an all-volunteer, artist-run 501(c)(3) organization, developed the creative aspects of the project and provides art materials and instruction on a weekly basis.

The space engineers who'll outline the technical challenges work for Hernandez Engineering (HEI), an award-winning subcontractor to NASA. Joy, an employee of HEI, recruited like-minded coworkers to provide an integrated arts and sciences educational experience for the students of Houston Preparatory Academy.

HEI also provided additional underwriting for the project. Additional resources were also provided by United Space Alliance, Half Price Books and Harris County Precinct One.

Inspiration for the project came from Astronaut Andy Thomas, who spent 130 days in the technically correct atmosphere of space station Mir. Upon his return, he commented on the unique and welcome qualities of Earth air, replete with humidity and aroma.

We Earthlings orient ourselves to our surroundings via sights, sounds, smells and touch. What will happen when we spend long periods of time away from the information provided by insect and animal sounds, plants that tickle, and a sky that changes color?

We already know that too much time spent in micro-gravity can weaken muscles and bones. If we spend years away from Earth, is it possible our senses could atrophy, too?

The kids of HouPrep don't want to take any chances. Their sensorium addresses the sense of touch, smell, sight and hearing (the sense of taste they're leaving to the chefs at NASA).

Joy Mullett's past experience with middle school students took place at HISD's Deady Middle School, where she helped kids design and complete an art car and a very large mural in the school cafeteria.

Through HWCA, Joy applied for and received a Mars Millennium Grant administered by Houston's Promise, which describes itself as "a mobilization of citizens, community leaders, and the corporate sector in creating a long-term vision for the future of children and youth in Houston."

Local granting organizations include:

Houston's Promise, Joint City/County Commission on Children, and Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County.

National granting organizations include:

the U.S. Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and its Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and the J. Paul Getty Trust.

Technical guidance is provided by Shirley Brandt (Webster 77598), HEI robotics engineer, currently working on a robotic arm on the international space station; Angie Chestnut (Kingwood 77345), HEI multi-media training developer (and elected trustee of Harris County Department of Education); Dale Jennings (Friendswood 77546), HEI test engineer for the X-38, a space station rescue vehicle; and Jennifer Nguyen (Clear Lake 77058), HEI spacecraft simulation programmer.



Brandt

Chestnut

Jennings

Nguyen

The Clear Lake branch of Half Price Books provided space reference books from their stock.

All classroom sessions led by the HWCA-HEI crew take place at 2:00 p.m., Room 131, Farish Hall, University of Houston on the dates shown below:

July 22, July 29, August 5 - Joy Mullett, art-making workshops

July 21 - Jennifer Nguyen, "Packing to Go to Mars"

July 23 - Angie Chestnut, "Learning Through the Senses"

July 30 - Shirley Brandt, "Weather on Mars"

August 2 - Dale Jennings, "Parachutes on Mars"

The project culminates in a "Three-Day Research and Design Extravaganza:"

August 9, morning - Educational Center, Challenger 7 Memorial Park, Harris County Precinct One, 2301 W NASA One Blvd, "Senses Scavenger Hunt" and field trip to Mother Earth Eco-Sculpture

August 9, afternoon - Training Academy, United Space Alliance, 1045 Gemini, Houston 77058, intensive Internet research time

August 10 - Space Center Houston

August 11 - Educational Center, Challenger 7 Memorial Park, Harris County Precinct One, 2301 W NASA One Blvd, all-day design and create session

August 19 - Reception, Children's Museum of Houston, 1500 Binz, Houston 77004-7112

Relevant web sites:

Houston Women's Caucus for Art  
Hernandez Engineering, Inc.  
United Space Alliance  
Challenger Park, Harris County Precinct One

[www.artwomenhouston.org](http://www.artwomenhouston.org)  
[www.hernandez-eng.com](http://www.hernandez-eng.com)  
[www.unitedspacealliance.com](http://www.unitedspacealliance.com)  
[www.co.harris.tx.us/comm\\_lee/](http://www.co.harris.tx.us/comm_lee/)  
[www.io.com/~pdhulce/cha17.html](http://www.io.com/~pdhulce/cha17.html)  
[www.neosoft.com/~houprep](http://www.neosoft.com/~houprep)  
[www.halfpricebooks.com](http://www.halfpricebooks.com)

Houston Preparatory Academy  
Half Price Books