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## Education

# Students learn from portable planetarium

Fisk-VU program funded by grant to expose minority, middle school students to astronomy

By **SUZANNE NORMAND BLACKWOOD**  
Staff Writer

**BELLEVUE** — Students at Nashville Christian School recently had a chance to gaze at the night sky without even stepping outside.

The occasion was a visit by the Fisk-Vanderbilt NASA Roadshow and its *StarLab* inflatable planetarium.

The program, offered through a partnership of Vanderbilt University's Dyer Observatory, Tennessee State University and the Vanderbilt and Fisk University physics and astronomy departments, is being funded through a grant from NASA.

"We obtained the equipment in June," said David James, an assistant professor of astronomy at Vanderbilt and adjunct professor at Fisk.

The portable, inflatable planetarium can be easily compacted and carried from site to site. While the planetarium is on display, astronomers can project an image of the night sky onto its interior and use it to teach students about the solar system, constellations, Greek mythology and the nature of the stars in a visual and relaxed environment.

The exhibits are run by James, Keivan Stassun, also an assistant professor of astronomy at Vander-



PHOTOS BY BILLY KINGSLEY / STAFF

**Vanderbilt's David James, an assistant professor of astronomy, talks with students at Nashville Christian School in a portable inflatable planetarium last week before the lights are turned off.**

bilt and an adjunct professor at Fisk, and Arnold Burger, a physics professor at Fisk. Graduate students assist with the exhibits as part of their academic training.

The purpose of the grant is to expose minority and middle school students to astronomy.

"We've already had 1,000 students come through the exhibit, and of those 1,000, 600 were minorities and 400 were girls," James said.

"Those two groups are very underrepresented in science. It's very heavily weighted toward white males, which is not representative of the population."

The reason the program was geared toward middle school is because that's when young people often lose interest in science, said Melanie Catania, Vanderbilt public affairs officer.

However, James pointed out, "we don't want to restrict ourselves to any particular group of students."

He said the exhibit has reached grade levels as young as kindergarten and has even been on display for the general public, including visitors at the Adventure Science Center. But, he said, older students usually benefit from it more because they have a longer attention span.

At Nashville Christian School, students in grades 10, 11 and 12 participated.

"They were just mesmerized," said Deborah Durrett, the school's college prep counselor. She said she learned about it when she attended a luncheon at Fisk.

"It was such an amazing event to walk into this thing that looks like



Nashville Christian School students leave the Fisk-Vanderbilt NASA Roadshow.

## To learn more

The Fisk-Vanderbilt NASA Roadshow is presented to schools and community organizations at no cost. Schools and organizations interested in having the exhibit visit can submit a request online by visiting [www.physics.vanderbilt.edu/fasst/](http://www.physics.vanderbilt.edu/fasst/) and clicking on "Roadshow and Planetarium."

an igloo and you've got the night sky," she said.

"I think it's wonderful for high school students to be exposed to such brilliant minds in physics and astronomy."

Durrett said she thinks having graduate students there also served as a reminder that astronomy is still a thriving field.

Although she has read stories about Greek mythology, student Ashley Coleman said she was curious about how the constellations actually appear in the sky.

Also, she said, "I thought it was a very unique way to learn about astronomy. I think it got people interested."

"It was a different perspective than what I've seen." ■