

A message from one who's flying high: You can too

Fitchburg native shows kids how science and math builds careers in the skies

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LEOMINSTER -- It's Tara Sweeney's job to help people experience micro-gravity by flying them to an altitude of 20,000 feet before dipping the plane downward, giving passengers a feeling similar to the weightlessness they'd feel in outer space.

It's a fun job, and one Sweeney hopes that area students will one day have a shot at as well.

"We need all these kids in here to come up with the big ideas that will propel space exploration in a different way," she said, prior to her recent visit to the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster.

Sweeney, a native of Fitchburg and proud product of its school system, shared her experiences in the Air Force and current work as a civilian with a group of eagerly listening local students on Monday. As she explained, the goal is not just to get them interested in science and math curriculum but to show them that a career like hers is possible.

"We're very excited to have her," said club Director Donata Martin. "She went to Fitchburg High and we have so many kids from Fitchburg, but she's also a woman. We're trying to encourage the girls to go on and study the sciences more so this was an opportunity we couldn't pass up."

Sweeney entered the U.S. Air Force Academy not long after graduating from Fitchburg High School in 1991. She's since retired and now works for the space entertainment company Zero G, which offers weightlessness flights to paying passengers.

Apart from working with tourists, Sweeney explained that her company has also had to take on more scientific responsibilities in recent years.

"NASA no longer has its reduced-gravity office and it provides funding to companies, universities, and private individuals who continue to do all the amazing science for space exploration. They come on our plane and we then fly all the NASA research experiments," she said.

Questions from students ranged from how much money Sweeney makes to whether evidence of global warming can be seen from space.

The visit was especially important to Hazel Metinewa, a 10-year-old from Leominster with dreams of one day becoming an astronaut.

"I like how she's explaining everything and what it's like when there isn't any gravity," she said. "And I got to learn how many miles per hour the space station goes around the planet."

Though Sweeney explained that very few children who dream of being astronauts grow up to be adults working at the International Space Station, she also said that the future is filled with exciting possibilities for kids like Hazel Metinewa.

"With the advent of space tourism and the commercial space industry, it's my hope that the industry blossoms and matures," she said. "The space program has changes so much from when I was a child to where I am now and it's about to enter a whole other phase."

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