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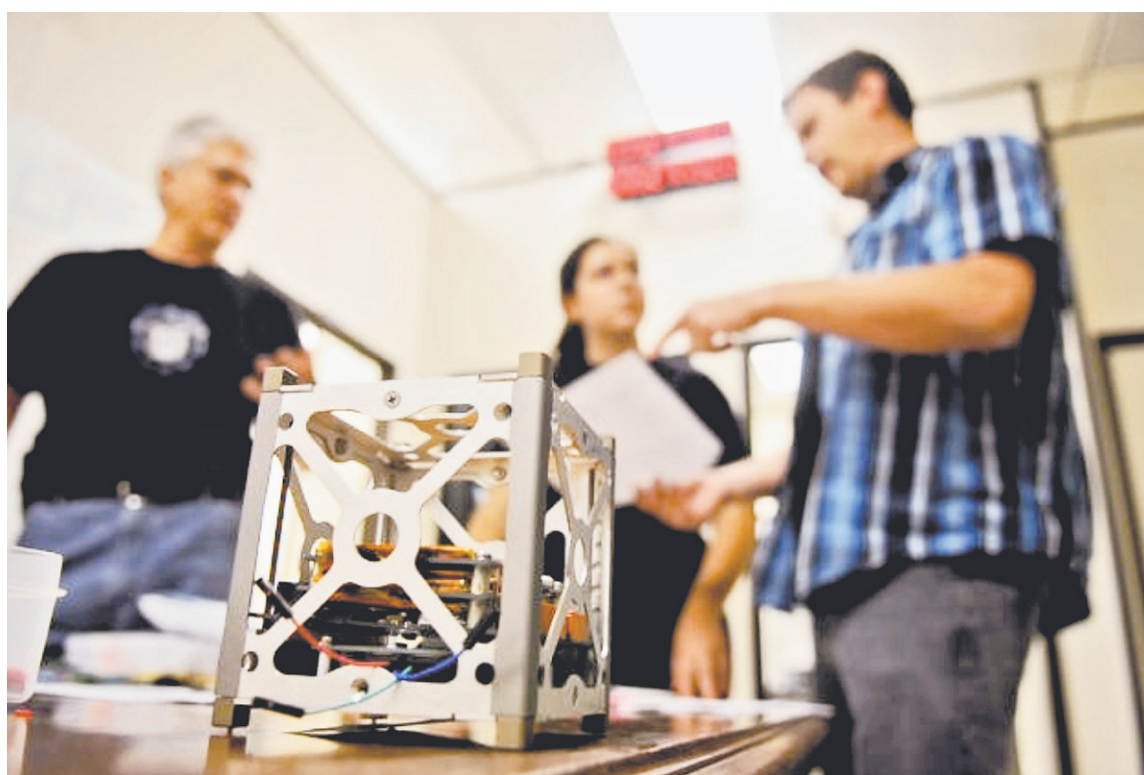
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Mentors Jim Kenney, left, and Shaun Daly, right, talk with Merritt Island High student Briana Luthman as they work on their CubeSat satellite at Kennedy Space Center. CRAIG BAILEY/FLORIDA TODAY

# FLYING INTO THE FUTURE

## MI students build tiny satellite, big potential

By Mackenzie Ryan  
FLORIDA TODAY

KENNEDY SPACE CENTER — In a room previously used to draw blood and run tests on astronauts, high school senior Maurisa Orona holds a satellite not much larger than the palm of her hand. Affectionately referred to as the "StangSat" — after Merritt Island High's nickname, the Mustangs — a handful of Merritt Island High students and their NASA mentors are adding finishing touches to a prototype that will soon be tested on a Prospecter 18 rocket.

"It means so much, it's going to be so amazing," said Briana Luthman, 17, looking forward to seeing the satellite she helped design and build launch in the Mojave Desert. "I can't wait."

Based on how the high-altitude launch on a Garvey Spacecraft Corp.



A Merritt Island High School student holds the mission patch for their CubeSat satellite. CRAIG BAILEY/FLORIDA TODAY

**MORE ONLINE**

**On Facebook:** Follow Merritt Island High's 'StangSat' on Facebook, search "MIHS-CubSat."

**On Twitter:** Keep up with the latest school science, engineering, technology and math news — commonly known as STEM — on Twitter by following the hashtag #BrevardSTEM.

See **SATELLITE**, Page 3A

## Court sides with convict on tax break

### Property Appraiser hopes for law change

By Wayne T. Price  
FLORIDA TODAY

Is prison a person's long-term residence if he or she is sentenced to spend 10 or more years there?

Brevard County Property Appraiser says so, and adds long-term prisoners should lose their homestead exemptions.

The state Supreme Court disagrees.

Richard Cassin was convicted of manslaughter in the 2010 death of his mother. Authorities said he left his mother to languish in horrific conditions in the Grant home they shared before she died in May 2010, all while cashing her Social Security checks. Barring early parole, the 56-year-old man will remain in a



Cassin



Richard Cassin owns the home in which his mother was found in foul conditions. He was convicted of manslaughter. RIK JESSE/FLORIDA TODAY

state prison until October 2027.

Cassin says he deserves a homestead exemption for the home. Such exemptions, given to Florida residents on their primary residences, limit annual increases in the assessed value of homes — which can mean significant property tax savings — and protect them from being

sold to settle most legal judgments.

Earlier this year, Richard Cassin's lifelong friend, Jay Meaney of Grant, acting as his advocate, received a notice from the Property Appraiser Office that the homestead ex-

See **CONVICT**, Page 3A

# School Board doubts new try

Deardoff wants 2nd chance for \$5M offer

By Dave Berman and Mackenzie Ryan  
FLORIDA TODAY

PORT CANAVERAL — Port Commissioner Bruce Deardoff said he is not giving up on his proposal to use \$5 million in port money to help keep three local schools open, but some Brevard School Board members on Tuesday indicated their skepticism about the donation actually coming through.

"That's politics," School Board member Michael Krupp said during a break in Tuesday's school board meeting. "I think he's beating a dead horse."

Deardoff said he has a new legal view that differs from one that concluded the donation would not be allowed, and he plans to bring the issue up during the April 17 Canaveral Port Authority meeting.

According to a statement issued through Deardoff's office, attorney Terry Lewis has found that "the Canaveral Port Authority arguably has the power to make the specified donation to the school board" under a provision of the port charter. Lewis is the general counsel to the Florida Association of Special Districts.

But Port Authority Chairman Tom Weinberg said port commissioners voted unanimously to seek a legal opinion from Fort Lauderdale attorney David Tolces, a specialist in lo-

See **SCHOOL**, Page 2A

## Panel: Focus college aid on older students

Laid-off workers often out to learn new skills

By Mary Beth Marklein  
USA Today

A panel of experts on higher-education finance is recommending that the federal government restructure its popular Pell Grant program to better meet the needs and goals of a growing population of college students: low-income adults over age 24.

Their numbers are rising as more low-income adults and recently laid-off workers seek to enhance their work skills, says a report on the recommendations to be released today.

Yet, their graduation rates are lower than those of their younger counterparts.

The Pell program would still award aid to traditional-age undergraduates whose grant amount is based on their parents' income — about 40 percent of recipients in 2010-11.

Based on the report, aid to the older students would be awarded using different criteria, including their income and their program of study.

See **COLLEGE**, Page 2A

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# Students

Continued from Page 1A

rocket goes this summer, students will plan and build a second and final satellite to launch into space on a future NASA mission.

The students are thought to be the second group of high schoolers to build and launch a "cubesat," a name that references the satellite's shape. More often, such a project is undertaken by college students — it's considered critical experience for graduates wanting to work with satellites.

"These high school students have been phenomenal," said mentor Shaun Daly, an avionics engineer at NASA.

There was a pretty steep learning curve.

Initially, the students didn't fully grasp the advanced math or know the programming language, but they quickly picked up the necessary knowledge.

As part of the daVinci Academy of Aerospace Technology at Merritt Island High, students were already familiar with electrical engineering concepts. The challenge came in taking the concepts they read about in textbooks and applying them.

They learned quickly, said mentor Kelvin Ruiz, an electrical engineer who works in the command and data systems division at NASA.

"Now they're at a level of programming in the C language that's almost at my level," he said with a laugh. "They correct my mistakes, they help me find bugs, they debug the code to get it where it is now. We're almost ready to fly into space."

Students are now fundraising for the trip to California this summer, and have so far raised nearly half of the \$10,000 they need.

"We really want to be there to support it," Briana said.



Students from Merritt Island High School work on their CubeSat satellite in the Operations and Checkout building at Kennedy Space Center. CRAIG BAILEY/FLORIDA TODAY

## Students inspired

The opportunity for Brevard high schoolers to design and build a satellite came about thanks to young engineers in a leadership group at NASA. They hope the pilot program will help inspire the next generation of engineers.

"It's just incredible to see the students working on the satellite," said club adviser Tracey Beatovich, who worked as a satellite mission manager in the Air Force before becoming a teacher.

But so, too, has been the impromptu learning experiences, like the unexpected chance to see equipment that astronauts such as Gus Grissom used.

A fellow NASA engineer saw the students one day and offered to show them the equipment — the suits and medical testing instruments; they're stored in a room just a few doors down.

Maurisa often has found herself telling friends, who have marveled at the experience but doubted that the satellite would actually launch: "No, it is real."

Once in space, the 'StangSat will measure and transmit data it gathers on vibration and shock environments. The group is partnering with

## HOW TO DONATE

The Merritt Island High School satellite club is fundraising for a trip to California this summer to support and see their satellite prototype launch during a high-altitude test. If you're interested in donating, contact Club Advisor Tracey Beatovich for more information at the school: 454-1000 or Beatovich.Tracey@BrevardSchools.org

California Polytechnic State University and they believe the information will help others build similar cubesats.

"We're measuring real stuff that will help people in the future to launch their missions," Maurisa said.

Students divided up the various roles.

Senior Gurkirat Kainth worked on the structural aspects: Making sure it wasn't too heavy, that all the parts fit, that its center of gravity was just right.

"I've always been fascinated by space," said the 17-year-old who is considering majoring in computer science at Florida Tech.

Briana worked on the command and data subsystem, which inspired her to pursue an electrical engineering at University of South Florida.

"My favorite part is programming the satellite," she said. "It's really cool to type something into the computer and ac-

tually see it function in front of you."

Like her friend, Maurisa is also pursuing an electrical engineering degree in college. Almost every student in the group said they plan to go into a STEM field, an acronym that stands for Science, Technology, Engineering or Math.

"Before engineering was very, very abstract. I thought: 'Oh, electrical engineer, that sounds really boring,'" Maurisa said. But she quickly discovered it was anything but. The processes, the testing, the programming — and putting it all together — was fascinating.

"It's a puzzle," she said. "I love puzzles, so it works out perfectly."

Ryan is at 242-3664 or mryan@floridatoday.com. Follow her on Twitter @Mackenzie\_Ryan or at Facebook.com/FloridaTodayEducation.

# Convict

Continued from Page 1A

emption was being revoked.

That's when Meaney, who pays taxes on the property for his friend, announced Cassin's intention to fight the decision.

A state Supreme Court ruling and Florida Administrative Code support Cassin, saying the "the temporary absence from one's homestead will not result in the denial of homestead if the applicant intends to return home."

Meaney said Cassin plans to return after his prison term.

In short, his right to a homestead exemption is not one Cassin loses as a convicted felon.

That's drawn the ire of Blickley and others.

"He can't have a conceal-carry permit anymore, it's likely his driver's license is going to expire and he'll lose that right, and he can't vote," Blickley said. "But we, the taxpayer, have to keep his property tax exemption intact? I just find that not in the spirit of what the law is intended to do."

The homestead exemption is saving Cassin about \$800 year. If the property value increases between now and 2027, that figure only increases.

The details of how Cassin ended up in prison aren't likely to generate him sympathy.

On May 7, 2010, the Brevard County Sheriff's Office responded to a "suspicious incident" at the Cassin home, and reported finding 90-year-old Florence Cassin, Richard Cassin's mother, lying in a foul-smelling bedroom.

She was covered in her own waste, with bugs crawling out of her mouth. Her eyelids were stuck closed. Her diet for at least the previous three weeks, Richard Cassin told deputies, had been

liverwurst and water that he had been feeding her through a straw.

She was taken to Sebastian River Medical Center, and died a week later.

Cassin plead guilty to aggravated manslaughter of an elderly person and sentenced to 18 years.

Blickley decided that the \$800 in extra tax revenue wasn't worth the cost to battle Cassin in court. Instead, she looked for legislative relief.

"I am making what I feel is a decision in the best interest of the taxpayer to not saddle the taxpayers with litigious fees that could be, who knows, in the tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars," Blickley said. "A simple change in the law would prohibit a property tax exemption for incarcerated felons."

This legislative session, Rep. Ritch Workman attempted to pass a bill denying Cassin, and other felons, homestead exemption benefits, but found Florida's Constitution ironclad on the issue.

"Anybody sentenced to prison for an extended period of time, legally and morally, their homestead becomes their 8-by-8 cell," Workman said. "To extend them the same homestead tax benefits that we extend our law-abiding citizens seems to be a bit outside the intent of the language in the Constitution about our homestead."

Workman said the solution might be a constitutional amendment.

Dante Trevisani, a lawyer with the Miami-based Florida Justice Institute, an inmate legal advocacy group,

urged caution on limiting inmates rights.

"These are individuals who already have a limited amount of rights," Trevisani said, "so we need to be extra careful when we talk about taking any rights away."

Contact Price at 321-242-3658 or wprice@floridatoday.com.



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