

Students

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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.”

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Convict

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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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