

Isle space education center marking its 20th anniversary

By Marcie Kagawa / mkagawa@staradvertiser.com POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 18, 2013

For 20 years Challenger Center Hawaii has been providing middle school students from across the state with the opportunity to experience simulated space missions, despite budget cuts two years ago that could have spelled the end for the learning center.

"I'm very grateful we've been able to touch the lives of so many students and teachers over these past two decades," said Liane Kim, founding educator and director of the space education center. "Hopefully, we've helped them see the value of their education and what they're learning in the classroom. We want to help them create and accomplish their dreams, touch their futures, even if in a small way."



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Challenger Center Hawaii, at Barbers Point Elementary School, teaches students about outer space.

Since it opened on April 8, 1993, the center at Barbers Point Elementary School has hosted more than 96,000 students and trained more than 1,500 teachers from Oahu and the neighbor islands.

"It's an honor to continue the legacy of the Challenger crew and Hawaii's own Ellison Onizuka" (an astronaut killed in the space shuttle Challenger disaster), Kim said. "That was the educational mission, as well as trying to make an impact on students in middle school with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education. Even before STEM became a buzzword, 20 years ago we already had a vision for the future."

However, in 2011 the Department of Education cut the center from its budget, Kim said, forcing the center to find other sources of funding, including the founding of the nonprofit group Friends of Challenger Center Hawaii.

"Right now it's a challenge year to year, but we've been doing this for 20 years," Kim said. "We're going to keep doing this as long as we can."

The state House of Representatives today will recognize the center's 20th anniversary and some of its key members' dedication to starting and running a hands-on STEM learning center in the islands. It's the first of several state acknowledgements for the center.

"The Challenger Center offers students the opportunity to engage in valuable hands-on experience via its mission simulations to supplement middle school curriculum," state Rep. Sharon Har (D, Kapolei-Makakilo), who introduced the House resolution congratulating the center on its 20th anniversary, said in a news release.

"The engaging problems that are posed to students at the Challenger Center create not only an exciting environment that will form lasting connections between classroom knowledge and real-world applications, but also illustrate the necessity of excellence in STEM that is not always apparent when those topics are taught solely from textbooks."

Three ceremonies to mark the 20th anniversary of Challenger Center Hawaii include:

- March 18, 2013 in the state House of Representatives.
- April 1, 2013 in the state Senate.
- April 8, 2013 at 1 p.m. in the Governor's Office, where Gov. Neil Abercrombie proclaims the day as Challenger Center Hawaii Day.