

Bottle rocket contest kicks off Aerospace Expo

By Ben Adducchio

On Thursday, about 600 students in grades 8-10 set off homemade bottle rockets and spoke with aerospace leaders as part of the North Central West Virginia Aerospace Expo in Bridgeport. Eighteen teams of students lined up in a parking lot next to a hangar at the Robert C. Byrd Education Center.

One at a time, they shot into the air the rockets they themselves had made. The rockets were judged based on airtime and an oral presentation by the teams.

Eighth grader Jenny Bundy from West Fairmont Middle School was one of the competitors.

“Science is definitely my favorite subject. I like aeronautics and that kind of stuff,” Bundy said.

“If I don’t go into aeronautics, I’m definitely interested in the medical field, so definitely science is the way to go for me in the future,” she said.

According to the Aerospace Industries Association, 27 percent of the aerospace manufacturing workforce will become eligible for retirement this year.

Education Director Darren Childers of the Mid-Atlantic Aerospace Complex says the purpose of the expo is to inspire students to learn more about science and possible job opportunities.

“What our program wants the students of West Virginia to understand, is that if they want to get involved in aerospace or aviation as a career, they do not necessarily have to leave the state of West Virginia to do that,” Childers said.

“Here at the North Central West Virginia Airport, there are many aerospace companies such as Pratt and Whitney, Bombardier, the Robert C. Byrd Institute, Aurora Flight Sciences, just to name a few, there are many more, that have a presence here.”

Global Science and Technology Incorporated is one of these companies at the expo. GST Weather Group Director Gene Shaffer talked to students about how forecasting equipment is used by airports and meteorologists.

“I think there’s two things you communicate to them. One is what they need if they want to get into the technology field, what they need to do now in middle school and high school, which is the math and the physics. That’s no big surprise,” Childers said.



The Aerospace Expo at Robert C. Byrd Education Center started off with bottle rocket competition.

“The other thing too is to make them aware that technology is not just science. It’s computer work, it’s IT work, it’s building infrastructure, so there’s a lot of different ways you can enter into this kind of a field,” he said.

One famous example of this is the Rocket Boys, a group of students from Coalwood, W.Va, who were inspired by Sputnik and a dedicated teacher to win a gold medal at the National Science Fair.

One of the Rocket Boys, Roy Lee Cooke, is a venture capitalist and philanthropist who attended the event.

He says that science can offer many new opportunities for both the state and West Virginians.

“Everything that we have we either grow or mine. We have depended upon mining in our state for so many years, and I hope for a lot of years yet to come,” Cooke said.

“But we’re now moving into this technology age and the Mid-Atlantic Aerospace is a main part of it, so I think it is very important to have science as a part of our life.

“The Rocket Boys were very connected to science, I was probably the least scientific of the six; however, it has been a major part of my life,” Cooke said.

The event was co-sponsored by the Mid-Atlantic Aerospace Complex, Fairmont State University’s Gear Up organization, RESA VII, and Pierpont Community and Technical College’s Robert C. Byrd National Aerospace Education Center.