

Distance Learning closes in on the digital divide

JSC's Distance Learning Team continues to bridge the gap between space and the country's inner cities through technology. The office recently hosted a distance learning event tying in young people from across the country to a live Webcast with Astronaut John (Danny) Olivas.

The event was held October 17, in tandem with Hispanic Heritage Month. U.S. Deputy Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Saul Ramirez participated in the event from the Bldg. 9 electronic classroom and joined Olivas, who responded to space-related questions during the Web chat session.

Ames Research Center provides the digital capability for the Webcast through NASA Quest, NASA's online education portal. The Webcast was made available to young people through Neighborhood Networks, HUD-supported computer labs around the country. There are more than 600 Neighborhood Network facilities in the U.S. They provide technology resources and tools for residents in HUD assisted communities in an effort to make them more self-sufficient. JSC has participated in two live Webcasts with Neighborhood Networks in the last six months.

"The HUD Neighborhood Network chats provide underrepresented minority

“I personally like to work with these cooperative partnerships with HUD because they impact children who don't have the same accessibility to resources due to their social and economic backgrounds. They are very receptive and appreciative kids so it is very rewarding for me to work with them.”

— John “Danny” Olivas
NASA Astronaut



Astronaut John “Danny” Olivas talks about astronaut training with students in Bldg. 9 and across the country through JSC's Distance Learning Project. Students from coast to coast participated in the live Webcast with Olivas to commemorate Hispanic Heritage Month. Shown here, students from the Houston and Galveston Neighborhood Network got a personal tour of the shuttle and station mockups from Olivas.

students an opportunity to ask questions of NASA minority engineers, scientists, and astronauts and receive immediate feedback during a live interactive webcast,” said Susan Anderson, manager

of JSC's Distance Learning Project. “Students have an opportunity to learn what motivated the professionals to pursue their careers, what educational track they chose, what technical applications they apply during their work, as well as learn about the advanced training the

professionals take to keep abreast of changes in their fields.”

In addition to the live chat sessions, the Distance Learning organization continues to expand its education and outreach activities. According to Anderson, there are now 12 different education modules ranging from space rocks and Earth observations to space food, robotics and careers that teachers can work from to incorporate space and JSC into lesson plans.

Distance Learning's resources are also starting to be tapped by JSC co-ops who can now use the technology to conduct presentations from JSC to their faculty sponsors at their universities or conduct outreach events with their former secondary

schools to share their NASA experiences with their home state.

“Our plan for fiscal year '01 is to take our video-conference modules and adapt them to web-based interactive personal challenge products that students and teachers can access over the Internet,” said Anderson. “We also want to strengthen the use of distance learning methods for employee development and its usefulness in space flight training.”

For more information about JSC's Distance Learning office or to become involved as a volunteer host visit the Web site <http://learningoutpost.jsc.nasa.gov> or call x47325.

Transportation Fringe Benefit Program expands commuting alternatives

Last April, the President signed an Executive Order, Federal Workforce Transportation, to reduce federal employees' contribution to traffic congestion and air pollution and to expand employees' commuting alternatives. Qualified employees may exclude up to \$65 per month (\$780 per year) from taxable wages and compensation for the commuting costs of using mass transportation and vanpools.

Additionally, employees using mass transportation and van pools may exclude from taxable wages up to \$175 per month for qualified parking. Qualified parking would be on or near the location from which employees commute to work using mass transit, but does not include parking at or near the employee's home.

The three-year pilot program became effective October 1. In 2002, the monthly exclusion for mass

Transportation/Parking Expenses Incurred	Dates Forms Are Due to Payroll
November 1 – December 15, 2000	December 11, 2000
December 15 – 31, 2000	January 8, 2001
January 1 – March 31, 2001	April 3, 2001
April 1 – June 30, 2001	July 3, 2001
July 1 – September 30, 2001	October 3, 2001
October 1 – December 31, 2001	December 7, 2001

transportation and vanpools will increase to \$100 per month (\$1,200 per year).

Employees who wish to exclude their mass transportation/van pool costs (up to \$65 per month maximum) and/or parking expenses (up to \$175 per month) from their taxable wages must complete a Transportation

Fringe Benefit Program Claim for Pre-Tax Commuting Cost of Actual Expenses form and submit it to the JSC Payroll Office. This form will be required monthly through December 2000; thereafter, employees must submit a claim form each quarter. These must be submitted to Payroll by the dates noted in the accompanying table.

Qualified vanpools only include those with a seating capacity of at least six adults (not including the driver) and at least 80 percent of the mileage use for purposes of transporting employees in connection with travel between

their homes and places of employment. For each commuting trip, the number of employees transported must be at least one-half of the adult seating capacity of the vehicle, excluding the driver.

Questions about this program may be addressed to the JSC Payroll Office x34832.

Get into the Spirit

Children were treated to Halloween fun and festivities at the JSC Child Care Center last month. As part of the event, children were encouraged to dress up for a trick or treating parade through JSC, visiting various buildings on site. Activities also included a petting zoo, pony rides, moon walk, face painting and a little clowning around with balloons.

Kids weren't the only ones having fun. Adults got into it as well by sponsoring game booths such as bean bag toss, ring toss, and the Wheel of Fortune.



NASA JSC Photo 2000e27368 by James Blair
Noah McWhorter, right, age 2, shows off his spider costume to Sharyn Bristol, age 2, during Halloween festivities at JSC's Child Care Center.



NASA JSC Photo 2000e27369 by James Blair
Vincent Conder, age 3, in a lion costume feeds a sheep in the animal petting zoo.