

Snafu teaches Evergreen students important lesson

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SPECIAL TO THE APPEAL TRIBUNE

“Science is unpredictable,” fifth-grade journalist Reese Johnston concluded after last week’s experiment at Evergreen School fell short of expectations.

Much of the experiment didn’t even get off the ground. A high altitude balloon – a miniature of the one scheduled for launch during the solar eclipse in August – flew into the air as expected, but its payload – boxes filled with experiments – stayed behind when a line snapped during takeoff.

“It was very windy, and we think a strong updraft took the balloon when it was released, and the accelerating force exceeded the line’s capacity,” said high school science teacher Creighton Helms. “Today was another lesson learned for us, although I’m crestfallen that it had to happen at the expense of our kids’ hard work.”

The whole school had gathered near the playground on June 7 to watch Helms, high school student John Wayne Michael Jr., and a team of Evergreen students launch the balloon. Wearing gloves to keep the oils from their hands off it, the team steadied the balloon as it was inflated to 1,500 grams of helium. Two Styrofoam boxes – not much larger than shoeboxes – lay in the grass nearby, connected to the balloon with 25-pound-test fishing line and ready to follow it into the sky. They held a camera, tracking device and instruments for measuring temperature, wind speed and pressure.

The Evergreen team, led by teacher Theress Stadel, had also packed a pair of raw eggs wrapped in differing cushioning materials (to see if they’d break) and a bag of chips (to see if it would explode). They decorated the box with a jaunty American flag and eagle figurine, as well as a note to anyone who might find it after it floated back to earth.

Right on schedule, the whole school counted down from 10. At “0,” the huge white balloon hovered for a moment and then was swept up into the cloudy sky. Its takeoff was so smooth and silent that it took everyone a moment to realize the payload wasn’t trailing it as planned.

“It was supposed to go up,” team members kept saying in shock.

At first, several of them shouted at fifth-grader Andrew Ueck, who’d overseen the knot tying. But Helms inspected the line and determined that no knots failed; the line simply snapped between the parachute and the first box.

Now, unencumbered by the weight of the experiments, the balloon would fly much higher than 2,500 feet as originally expected, maybe to 6,000 or 8,000 feet, Helms said. Without its tracking device, it was as good as gone.

“I’m sad,” said fifth-grader Jerisha Perez, who had helped tie on the payload and make posters for the event.

As soon as the balloon was no longer



Evergreen School students launch a high altitude balloon June 7.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTENA BROOKS / SPECIAL TO THE APPEAL TRIBUNE

visible in the sky, Evergreen’s student body pushed forward to ask questions. At one corner of the crowd, kindergartners clustered around the payload.

“What’s that?” asked teacher Michelle Buckley, pointing to a yellow instrument peeking out of the Styrofoam.

“An anemometer,” said fifth-grader Melia Horner.

“A what?” the teacher asked, with a prompting smile. “That is not a kindergarten word.”

“It’s a device that measures wind speed,” Melia explained.

The team’s remaining members – Brandon and Kaleb Schurter, Jon Jensen and Brianna Zurbrugg – asked and answered questions too.

Even in the face of disappointment, learning had to go on. In fact, the snafu was an important step toward the anticipated success of the final launch on Aug. 21 by the high school team, Helms said. That larger balloon is expected to reach

nearly 100,000 feet and carry equipment that will film the eclipse for NASA.

“The value in this experience – from the high school perspective – is now we know we’ve got to look at the line’s capacity to withstand accelerating force and how best to get the payload into the air gently,” he said.

For Evergreen students, there’s already good news. Their payload will get a second chance to fly on June 20. This time they’ll use 50-pound-test fishing line and a string system to “walk the balloon” up into the air to minimize sudden tugs from the wind, Helms said.

At that launch, the high school team will also send up a tethered balloon to check its satellite-camera connection and ground station.

“I feel like everything happens for a reason,” Stadel said. “Maybe it’s more important for my students to be a part of this second launch where they can see NASA’s experiments.”



Evergreen School students launch a high altitude balloon June 7. A strong gust of wind broke the line between the balloon and the boxes of experiments. The team will try again June 20.

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