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Young rocket enthusiast
 photo by Chris Fritchie



took an interest in a local space camp at Moffett Field, (we lived in Mountain View, California at the time) we thought perhaps, to whet his appetite a bit further, we'd buy a few of the Estes hobby-type rockets to expose him to the science of aviation. Little did we know just how far the spark of interest would fly.

I had been sitting in the living room folding the laundry when I heard a blood-curdling scream, the fire alarms went off in the house, and I heard what sounded like gunfire. I ran toward the boys' rooms and met my husband running in from another direction. We found Nash standing in the middle of the room, smoke billowing about him, his eyes as large and round as saucers, tears streaming. He just stared, speechless. I asked him what in the world had happened. I glanced all over the room trying to find the source of such confusion and smoke! He finally broke from his trance, "It's a ro.. auu..ocketttt!"

My husband quickly took charge, opening windows as we frantically scoured

the room for the engine. I imagined it smoldering, waiting for an opportunity to set my house on fire. Nick eventually found a smoldering hole in the bed quilt and thereafter the sheets and mattress. My husband dragged the mattress outside along with anything else combustible.

When we were all gathered we discovered what had happened. Nick had preloaded one of his rockets and left it on the dresser with two wires

And the Rockets Red Glare

By Cynthia Howe

IS YOUR CHILD a future rocket scientist? As they scuttle about in the dirt with curiosity stamped across their forehead over their latest balsam wood plane, you may be looking at a future rocket hobbyist and perhaps an eventual contributor to a NASA program.

When my son, Nash, was no more than six, his curiosity got the best of him and consequently he ignited what would become one of our favorite family stories.

We had been home-schooling our sons and when our eldest son, Nick,

sticking out of the dry fuel engine. An overwhelming curiosity overtook Nash who simply placed the battery against the two wires and “swoooooosh!” the engine flew around the room hitting the walls, bed and just missing his face. He had been dumbfounded at the result. “I put batteries in my toys and they don’t blow up,” he explained. We laughed with great relief knowing that no one had been hurt and there wasn’t a fire. Three weeks later we found the engine in the bottom of the toy chest, but the unforgettable story stays secure in our treasure chest of memories.

TAKING TO THE FRISCO SKIES

Although your experience may not have set your bedroom fire alarms off, many of us have fond memories of building and launching a model rocket when we were kids. The flames, noise and smoke billowing around us as we raise our eyes to the skies in wonderment and fascination. Numerous Frisco members of the Dallas Area Rocket Society (DARS) are re-living those memories with their children right in our own backyard.

On May 17th from 11 to 4, as they do the third Saturday of every month, DARS will be meeting on a 70-acre parcel of land owned by the Frisco Parks Department to fire their latest rocket creations. The site is on Honey Grove just off of Panther Creek Road. The city was very gracious to the organization in allowing this undeveloped land to be used for such a family-friendly activity. Their only requirement to the group was to furnish insurance. These events can draw quite a crowd.

Young and old alike, newcomers and seasoned, they come together as one huge family to share their passion, and for some, their curiosity. Many spectators looking for the excitement of



Sapp family admiring a launch

photo by Chris Fritchie

a live launch often join them. And who can blame them? There are a number of reasons to be attracted to model rockets.

Of course, there’s the power of an engine, the allure of gunpowder, altitude and explosions, but there’s more. An opportunity to gain an education, including the disciplines of physics and aerodynamics. Home-schoolers often get involved with model rockets for the hands-on opportunities that motivate students to expand their knowledge through experience.

Tim Sapp, a member of DARS, remembers back to his childhood. “I flew model rockets as a kid.” But he didn’t leave rockets behind for too long. “In the Air Force I worked on cruise missiles. When I had kids I thought I’d build a rocket with my son. So much about model rockets had changed since I was a kid and it was so much fun. From that time on, our whole family became

avid hobbyists of rockets,” he explains. Mr. Sapp is not alone in his parental “return to childhood” experience.

Don Magness, president of DARS, has been firing off rockets since he was six years old. In college he majored in aerodynamics and afterward worked as an engineer for years. You could say his childhood experience ignited a lifetime of ambition. His hobby is his current livelihood. He owns Squirrel Works, a model rocket manufacturing company, where he can make his dreams come true and sell them online.

DARS boasts a membership of more than 100 families, so their get-togethers are geared toward family fun as well as the rockets. “The kids have made friends with other club members’ kids and as the years have gone by, we’ve really grown to appreciate the inclusive friendly environment this hobby surrounds us in,” Mr. Sapp shares.

DARS is the oldest and largest chapter of the National Association of Rocketry (NAR) in Texas, having been established in 1972. Its purpose is to educate and promote the hobby of consumer rocketry in the DFW metroplex. They pride themselves on their outreach programs to such organizations as Boy Scouts of America, Indian Guides and the YMCA. DARS provides these groups high level instruction, hands-on learning experiences as well as opportunities to earn their Space Exploration merit badges. Because the group is oriented toward outreach programs many manufacturers such as Estes are more than happy to donate materials to the organization for their specific programs.

Last September Estes generously contributed new model rockets, entitled the “Estes Eggscaliber.” They provided both motors and kits so the experience would be unhindered. DARS supervised 16 Boy Scouts while they earned their

Space Exploration merit badges by helping them build and fly their Eggscaliber Rockets. The object of the unique model is to see how high you can fly your egg and have it land safely back on the ground. George Sprague shared, "The scouts had a terrific time launching and sometimes scrambling eggs."

What would scramble an egg? Sometimes too big of an engine. Apparently for each letter you go up, you double the size of the last letter-size engine. For example, a "B" engine is twice as powerful as an "A" engine and so on. Most local members fly rockets with A-D engines. Small engines found in hobby kits can be flown safely in most fields where they allow rockets. However, the larger size engines entail more restrictive requirements for fields and materials.

After flying the hobby model rockets for a while, Mr. Sapp joined Tripoli of Texas, a club of rocketeers that build and launch high-powered rockets, some of them utilizing fuels that are federally controlled. Some of these rockets are taller than the people launching them and reach heights of more than a mile. Mr. Sapp's personal best included breaking Mach 1 with a rocket he built himself. When he flew it, he had to have the manufacturer meet him at the launch site due to federal regulations. The federal regulations seem to be just one of the difficulties the hobbyists are dealing with.

As a result of 9/11, stricter controls were imposed on misuse and unsafe storage of explosive materials such as propellants used in hobby rockets. While most hobbyists fly their rockets with the smaller engines, rocketeers who fly the "big boys" with motors ranging from H-P, find the restrictions far more cumbersome. Along with federal

regulations is a concern of available land space for launching rockets.

Mr. Sapp shared the hobbyists common concern, "All the good park lands are being taken over by soccer fields." The land they currently use for their monthly launch will eventually become another soccer field for Frisco Parks



Terry Wheelock prepares for a launch

photo by Chris Fritchie

and Recreation. The more concentrated the population becomes in Frisco, the farther out rocket hobbyists, hunters and hikers will all have to search for safe environments for their activities.

Just as any passion can lead you farther than you first imagined, so too can rocketry lead you to the stars. There are a number of scholarships for aerospace-related sciences as well as college grants, and who knows, perhaps to NASA itself. For example, high school rocketry whizzes may win big bucks for college tuition through the Team America Rocketry Challenge.

DID YOU SAY MONEY FOR COLLEGE?

On Saturday, May 17th, the 6th Annual Team America Rocketry Challenge, (the largest model rocket showcase on the planet) will be held at The Plains, Virginia.

Throughout the year rocket teams have been designing, building and flying a variety of model rockets with their eye on the prize: big bucks for college tuition as well as travel grants to NASA's Student Launch Initiative (SLI). Their mission: fly a model rocket to an altitude of 750 feet, have it stay aloft for exactly 45 seconds, while it carries two raw eggs. Broken eggs equal disqualification and back to the drawing board. The breadwinners, along with the top 25 finalists, qualify to continue on to NASA's SLI.

THE NASA STUDENT LAUNCH INITIATIVE

Every year participating schools provide students in grades 7-12 an opportunity to compete in the NASA Student Launch Initiative. School teams collaborate on design, building and testing reusable rockets and in the process learn rewarding lessons first-hand. Their mission: to construct a rocket that will reach an altitude of one mile. At the end of the teams participate in a

launch at Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

THE REST OF THE STORY...

As do most classic family stories based on aging memories, Nash remembers things a bit differently. His rendition? "I was not screaming in fear, as my mother suggests, but of hysteria! I just made a rocket go of in my room! I thought I was on top of the world – such power. Until I saw my dad standing right behind my mother. A child's worst fear: the discipline of a six-foot-seven-inch-235-pound father. Tear encouraged tear while I awaited the final verdict. My mother convinced my father that the experience had been punishment enough and when he started laughing, I knew my life had been spared."

Cynthia Howe is a freelance writer living in Little Elm.