STARBASE Swamp Fox celebrates ten years at McEntire

EASTOVER, SC, UNITED STATES
02.12.2017
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STARBASE Swamp Fox moved to McEntire ten years ago, partnering with military personnel to assist the fifth-graders with career exploration and observation of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) applications in the real world. The instructional program provides 25 hours of stimulating activities and experiences and is resourced and sponsored by the Department of Defense. It is funded annually through a federal grant to the South Carolina National Guard and the only expense incurred by participating schools is for transportation. The program got its start with the South Carolina National Guard in 2003. Back then the program was exported to various local schools. But four years later, the program moved to its permanent location at McEntire JNGB.

Over the last ten years, STARBASE Swamp Fox has taught more than 9,000 students and is on track to surpass the 10,000 mark this year. In the last two years alone, STARBASE Swamp Fox had more than 2,000 students successfully complete its program and averaged about a 30 percent increase from pre-test to post-test knowledge.

The aim of STARBASE is to raise interest and improve the knowledge and skills of young people in STEM which in turn will provide for a highly educated and skilled American workforce who can meet the advanced technological requirements of the Department of Defense. STARBASE Swamp Fox offers hands-on learning and experiments and includes a curriculum focusing on such topics as Newton’s Laws of Motion, Bernoulli’s Principles, and Properties of Air. STARBASE instructors, South Carolina Air National Guard pilots and other personnel from McEntire participate in the program by serving as teachers, role models and mentors. Secondary goals of STARBASE include the promotion of healthy lifestyles and drug avoidance. All this ties into the program’s motto “Dreams + Action = Reality.” Students and STARBASE staff come up with their own call-signs during the program and the week of instruction culminates with the students building and launching their own model rockets. “Rockets. That’s the really big wow factor for us,” Motley said.

Sunday’s ceremony was held in the Joint Armed Forces Reserve Center auditorium which was filled with teachers from the participating schools, current students and STARBASE alumni, plus parents as well as SC National Guard personnel. The afternoon began with the SC Army National Guard Band ensemble providing music, the SC Youth Challenge Academy presenting the Colors and students Reese Brooks, Samantha Norris and Regan McGill singing the National Anthem. South Carolina Assistant Adjutant General-Air, Brig. Gen. Russell Rushe, and Deputy Adjutant General, Brig. Gen. Roy McCarty provided some welcoming remarks which was followed by a video highlighting the history of the STARBASE Swamp Fox program.

The program then proceeded with formal recognitions of the STARBASE staff including Lt. Col. (ret.) Jim “Lightning” Hiott, Senior Master Sgt. (ret.) Lola “Sugarr” Banks, Ms. Linda
“Mad Scientist” Willing, Senior Master Sgt. (ret.) Buddy “Gamecocks” McDaniel, Master Sgt. (ret.) Stan “STATS” Seabrook, Mrs. Vickie “Butters” Saunders, and Mrs. Beth “Boo” Barkley. In addition, several sections from the base (such as the fire department and life support) which host the students on their field trips were formally recognized as were representatives from the South Carolina Military Department and other organizations in the South Carolina National Guard which provide behind the scenes support.

Mr. Ernie Gonzales, Director of Youth Programs and Senior Policy/Program Analyst for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs provided the keynote address. “It’s an honor to be here. There’s a lot of sweat equity in this program from the South Carolina National Guard as well as the community and this is the result of it. It’s great to see all of the relationships and all those who support this program and I think it’s a benefit to the kids to see South Carolina National Guard men and women, both in and out of uniform providing services in different ways. They reach out and show [the kids] that ‘Look, you can be whatever you want to be. Just continue to learn.’”

After the formal ceremony concluded, an open house was held in a nearby classroom which showcased some of the activities and experiments which take place during a typical STARBASE Swamp Fox week. STARBASE alumni and parents were on hand to demonstrate the experiments and answer questions.

“As the parent of a fifth-grader, one of the most important aspects of STARBASE I see is the conception that children have of the military. To have them be able to come on base and to interact with military people in an education sense, it enlightens them to see the different opportunities that the military offers,” said Barkley, the office manager for STARBASE Swamp Fox. While STARBASE Swamp Fox is not designed as a recruiting tool, Barkley pointed out that it has been particularly helpful in showing young people, especially girls, that military jobs are open to all. “I’ve had girls in this program who didn’t know that they could be an officer, or a pilot or a firefighter until they came out here,” she said.

During his reflections, Motley recalled that when he was approached by former South Carolina Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Stan Spears, about being the STARBASE director. He agreed thinking it would be a three to five year gig. “I was thinking, I’m an educator. I’d love to get back into it. So I’ll do this for three years to get it going and by then it will be firmly established on base. Maybe I could hang around as much as five years. And suddenly, here we are at the ten year reunion,” Motley said. “I’ve stuck around because this isn’t a job, it’s a calling.”

As for the program’s future, Motley said “We hope to expand. If not here [at McEntire] then up in the Greenville area. That’s one of our target areas. That would give STARBASE a
presence in the Upstate.”

Another program growth area is a test program called “STARBASE 2.0” which involves expanding into the middle school level, according to Motley.

In conclusion, Motley observed “We only have four STARBASE staff. So in order to make this program as successful as it is, it really does ‘take a village’ to make this happen. Everyone involved feels like they’re making a difference in kids’ lives. That’s what’s most important.”

NEWS INFO

Date Taken: 02.12.2017
Date Posted: 02.19.2017 17:16
Story ID: 224075
Location: EASTOVER, SC, US

Web Views: 65
Downloads: 0
Podcast Hits: 0

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