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It's rocket day at Griffith Park for students from a poor part of downtown LA

'Summer of Science' immerses students in hands-on learning during summer break



Hope Street Summer of Science camp tries out their homemade rockets at Griffith Park in Los Angeles on Friday, June 21, 2024. The youth are members of the Hope Street Margolis Family Center's after school program in downtown Los Angeles. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)



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Eighty-five pairs of small hands launched rockets—sembled out of recycled plastic bottles, multicolored duct tape and construction paper—dozens of feet into the summer sky at Griffith Park on Friday, June 21.

The kids are part of the Hope Street Margolis Family Center’s “Summer of Science” program, which immerses low-income and at-risk students from downtown Los Angeles in hands-on learning during the school break. The seven-week program is completely free, and runs in partnership with Dignity Health California Hospital Medical Center.

“We believe that by investing in kids at this young age their overall health and well-being trajectory will improve,” said Joseph Wright, the director of operations and innovation at Hope Street. “This summer program ties in with everything they’re learning in the school year, so they don’t lose it over the summer.”

Wearing matching blue T-shirts and exhilarated smiles, the “Summer of Science” participants range from first graders to high school students.



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“It is actually good to go out, and I don’t want to be stuck at home all day doing nothing,” Caleb Nerrio, 14, said. “Instead I can play soccer and basketball and do the rockets. It’s a lot of fun.”

Many of the kids, whose families may not be able to afford costly summer camps, would otherwise be cooped up at home for the break.

“Being able to expose the kids to different things like dissections and chemical reactions, that they might not have available to them on an everyday basis, truly brightens my heart,” said Yajaira Molina, Hope Street’s education coordinator.

Some of the Hope Street staff who helped guide the rocket launch are graduates of the program themselves. Roberto Camacho, a biochemistry major at UCLA, was a Hope Street student for nine years. Now he works there in the summers, paying forward a love of science.

“Home hasn’t exactly been easy, but ever since I was introduced to Hope Street, I’ve had a blast,” Camacho said. “I’ve been welcomed and I really believe in what Hope Street stands for.”

Sid Oxford, Hope Street’s youth services coordinator, has been involved in the organization for 20 years. He said he looks forward to the rest of the summer, which will include craft projects, sports and science experiments.

“It’s amazing to see these kids get together and socialize, and continue learning even if they don’t realize they’re learning,” Oxford said. “It keeps me coming back.”