



Pocantico Hills Highlights

A monthly newsletter of information and updates about the Pocantico Hills School community

February 2024

Students take virtual trip to Mars with guest speaker

Rocks on the planet Mars are sharp, so much so that they punctured holes in the wheels of the spacecraft that have landed there.

It's an interesting fact, one that engineers were not aware of even after having tested and retested the spacecrafts movement on Earth. Rocks on this planet have been worn smooth by the wind over the centuries, therefore keeping the wheels intact, a phenomenon that does not happen on Mars.

This is just one of many interesting details shared by Ben Thoma, a mechanical engineer who works at NASA. Mr. Thoma beamed in to the Pocantico auditorium with a group of fifth and sixth graders. He was virtually talking to students from his lab based in California.

“We learn from everything we do,” he said.

Mr. Thoma has learned a lot about Mars and is patiently waiting to learn more. For the past 25 years he has worked in the Jet Propulsion Lab, primarily on Mars missions. He has worked on both the Spirit and Opportunity Rovers, which were launched in 2003, on the Entry, Descent





and Landing Team. He has also worked on the Curiosity Rover mission, which took place between 2005-2011, where he was the lead engineer for the descent phase of the mission, or what he called the “jet pack” that lowered the spacecraft onto the surface of the planet. In 2021, his work on the descent was also used for the Perseverance Rover. He is currently working on the team

that will bring samples back from the red planet.

“I still find it amazing we have these vehicles on planets, and they are taking pictures of them,” Mr. Thoma told students.

Mr. Thoma, who is the uncle of a current student, was invited to speak to space enthusiasts after they had finished a unit on space, said science teacher James Cioffi.

Using an animated graphic, Mr. Thoma shared how these amazing spacecrafts are launched from earth and how they make it to the surface of Mars.

The rover, a robotic vehicle, is launched using a rocket and has several parts that help it get to its destination safely, including a heat shield, and mechanisms that assist it to land. It takes seven months for the spacecraft, traveling at 10,000 mph, to arrive in Mars’ atmosphere from Earth.”

Once in the planet’s atmosphere, the descent will begin, a complicated process that ensures the rover lands on the surface safely and intact.

Mr. Thoma explained that the spacecraft will slow down once it hits the atmosphere surrounding Mars to about 1,000 mph, at which time a parachute is deployed that will slow the spacecraft down further, to about 400 mph. It is at this point when the heatshield falls off and the “jet pack” fires up. The rover is then suspended above the planet’s surface and

lowered on to it with the use of cables. Once securely on a solid surface, the cables release and the “jet pack,” is separated from the Rover.

Students were also shown video footage of the Perseverance Rover that landed on the surface on February 18, 2021.

Mr. Thoma said once the video showed the spacecraft landing a huge cheer went up in the NASA control room.

“That was pretty cool for me to see the footage,” Mr. Thoma said.

The Perseverance Rover is on the planet to collect rock samples that eventually will be returned to Earth.

“We really want to know if there was ever life on Mars,” Mr. Thoma said.

The samples that are retrieved are about the size of a piece of chalk, he said, and 30 samples will be taken, which will be packed up into a container about the size of a basketball.

“It will be put in the tip of a rocket, which will be launched. A third spacecraft will grab the “basketball” and put it in a return vehicle that will deliver the samples back to Earth,” Mr. Thoma said.

Students had an opportunity to ask questions.

One curious student wanted to know if NASA was planning on investigating other planets.

According to Mr. Thoma, the answer is yes, and currently they have their sites on Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter.

“We have other spacecraft that have gone to Jupiter,” he said, “We are really interested in going to other places in the solar system. The big thing is looking for water. Wherever there is water, there is life.”

Europa, Mr. Thoma explained, is an icy moon and there are plans to dig through the ice in the search for liquid water. He noted too how Mars was once full of water and something happened, and they want to know what it was that took place to cause the water to disappear.

The next step would be to one day send humans to these planets too, Mr. Thoma responded to another question.

“We are now developing technology to go back to the Moon to eventually send people to other places,” Mr. Thoma said, although the prospect would be very expensive considering the necessities that would be required to equip a person for such a long mission.

When asked if AI technology is used with the rovers, Mr. Thoma explained that it is not, but the spacecraft are equipped with Autonomous Driving technology. Engineers on Earth can send a signal to the vehicle, for example a target to move to, and the Rover will determine the best path to get to that point.

“It takes 10 minutes for a signal to get from Earth to Mars,” he said.

Another student was interested in learning about Olympus Mons, the tallest peak on Mars, which is even higher than Mt. Everest.

“It is absolutely ginormous,” Mr. Thoma said, as he showed photos of this landmark on Mars.

Broadway performer in the spotlight at Pocantico

Just as the middle school students at Pocantico Hills Central School District begin to prepare for the spring musical, “Guys and Dolls, Jr.,” actress Patti Murin, who was a guest at a recent assembly for middle school students, told them that was one of the first shows she was in while in high school, where she was cast as one of the Hot Box Girls.



She said from that time on, she pursued acting, whatever role she could get throughout high school, community theater productions and she went on to study musical theater at Syracuse University. Her talent, and tenacity, eventually landed her on Broadway, where she was part of the original cast of “Frozen,” in the role of “Anna.”

She has also appeared as “Gelinda” in the touring production of “Wicked,” and starred in the short-lived production of “Lysistrata Jones,” and roller-skated her way through “Xanadu.” She also had a recurring role as Dr. Nina Shore on the television series “Chicago Med” and has had several roles in Hallmark channel movies.

“I just really loved doing it,” Ms. Murin said of acting. “I really liked being on the stage. When I went to college, I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted to do.”

Her favorite roles, she said, are those that allow her to show off her sense of humor and make the audience laugh.

“I like being funny and I like characters who are funny,” Ms. Murin said.

It’s one of the many things she loved about the character of “Anna,” because it allowed her to be funny. And it allowed her to sing one of her favorite songs, “For the First Time in Forever,” in “Frozen,” “Anna” sings it while surrounded by the entire cast.

“It’s one of those big moments,” she said.



While Ms. Murin has had her time in the spotlight, she shared how being a successful actor has its challenges.

First the audition process can be challenging, between preparing material for it, preparing more material if you are called back and the anxiety of waiting to find out if you got the role.

Once cast in a role, Ms. Murin said the days can be long. Broadway shows begin with workshop related rehearsals which can run between four to five weeks from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. six days a week. Once in the theater there are two to three weeks of tech, when the stage is prepared with lights, costumes, and any technical aspects that make the show magic are worked on and perfected. Previews last about four weeks and allow the performers to go through the show with an audience and any changes are noted and become part of the production.

“Then you open the show, usually you do eight shows, six days a week,” she said. “It’s tough, but that’s the dream.”

These days she balances her work with that of her actor husband, Colin Donnell, and their two children. It helps, she said, to have a partner who understands the ups and downs that come with working as an actor.

Ms. Murin said that for all the shows she was involved in while a student in high school in Hopewell Junction, where she grew up, she was never cast in the lead.

“Don’t be discouraged if you don’t get the lead roles,” she told the aspiring actors in the audience. “You can’t have a musical without everyone else up there. Most of us on Broadway were not in the leads, we just keep doing it because we love it.”

She also noted that having a career as an actor can be inconsistent. You never know what roles or jobs will come your way and when one show ends, there might not be another one right away or a show could end unexpectedly.

“It’s really inconsistent, you really have to love it to do it as a job,” she said. “I don’t know if I’ll ever retire, actors can be of all ages.”

Another piece of advice she shared was to be nice to everyone they meet and work with, from the costumers and make-up artists to those who work in the theater but may not be onstage.

“Be interested in every aspect of the show,” she said. “Learn as much as you can about the other jobs. It truly takes a huge village.”

Everyone is a storyteller! Just ask author Jason Edwards

Children’s author Jason Edwards, an experienced writer, has several stories he has written under his belt, among them the Will Allen and the Chronicles of the Monster Detective Agency series. He has won numerous awards for his work including the LitPick Top Choice Book Review Award and the Mom’s Choice Award for Family Friendly Media Award. With all this personal experience as an author, Mr. Edwards insists that anyone and everyone can be and is a storyteller too.



To prove his point, during a recent visit to Pocantico, Mr. Edwards met with elementary students and had them help him craft a story in what he calls a “storyplay.” Using the standard story elements of character, setting and plot, together with the students they created a silly, mysterious story all with an important lesson. Students helped him create a character, develop a conflict, resolution and moral.

“All of you are great authors, some of you just don’t know it yet,” he told the students.

Regarding character development, Mr. Edwards showed a few recognizable fictional and real characters on a screen. Among them were Big Bird, Wonder Woman, Abraham Lincoln, Dora the Explorer, and more. The students were able to recognize most of them because, as they told the author, they were familiar with the characters looks and behavior, including the things they have in common as well as noticeable differences.

“It’s those differences that make the characters who they are,” Mr. Edwards said.

He then flashed on the screen photos of various places including a beach, baseball field, cave, and a haunted house, these all relate to the setting, or where the story takes place.



“Characters make your story, but you have to put them in a place,” he said.

As he asked students what they should include in their story, they all agreed a monster was important, a main character, who they decided would be a little boy and a place, which just happened to

be a haunted house. This, of course, all helped set up the conflict — a monster shows up, the little boy is scared, but no one the boy asks for help believes the monster is real, and eventually he is able to overcome his fear with some help.

“I may be small, and scared, but inside I am bigger than 20 of you!” the little boy learns and uses as a mantra to make the scary monsters seem less of a big deal.

The boy making this announcement caused the monster to say “eep,” a far cry from the scary roar it had been using to frighten him. Eventually, as the boy kept repeating the mantra, the monster ran and hid in the closet.

“The end!!!” shouted the students.

As the students helped the story develop, Mr. Edwards would ask them questions. The boy was going through a typical day, waking up, getting ready for school, and returning home. That’s when the monsters show up. He asked students what they do first thing in the morning (get out of bed, brush their teeth), what items they would need throughout the day (a backpack for school) and tools that could help fend off the monster (a sword?)

“You were all great story tellers,” Mr. Edwards told them.

Student shares cultural holiday with her class

Earlier in the day when Marina Lombardo's students were at lunch, they were introduced to some Lunar New Year traditions from China. Parent volunteers shared temporary tattoos, handmade bookmarks and stickers and there was even a dragon parade. Lunch on this day consisted of Chinese flavors, including General Tso's and a Chicken and Rice Bowl.

Later, once settled back in their classroom, the students were in for a surprise when their classmate Ruishan J., who was born in China, made a presentation where she explained how and why the Chinese celebrate the Lunar New Year.



Dressed in a stunning red dress, the color of prosperity, according to Chinese tradition, Ruishan shared a Power Point presentation she had made. Each slide depicted how she and her family celebrate the holiday. One showed her and her siblings dressed in traditional clothing.

“We clean the house, wear red clothes and feast on dumplings, rice balls, and spring rolls,” Ruishan said.

She went on to share that in another tradition, family members give one another red envelopes often filled with money. The holiday is also celebrated with the launching of fireworks and lanterns are lit and sent into the night sky.

Ruishan also shared the legend of how the holiday began. She said many years ago a lion-like monster named Nian was attacking villages and one day a house in a village that was being threatened caught on fire. The fire frightened Nian away, and that is why, today, it is a tradition to wear red and light lanterns, the color and “fire” from the light sources keeps the monster away.



Each year, Ruishan explained, is assigned an animal. Last year, she said, was the Year of the Rabbit, and 2024 is the Year of the Dragon. Assigning an animal to a year comes from another legend, in which a god hosted a race among the animals, the animals who came in the first 12 spots then became the zodiac symbols for the year. The animals rotate from year to year, among them are a pig, dog, rooster, monkey, goat, horse, snake, dragon, rabbit, tiger, ox, and rat.

After answering some questions Ruishan passed out beautifully decorated red envelopes to her classmates and each received a special red bracelet.

“How do you say, ‘thank you,’ in Chinese,” a student asked?

A Message from the Superintendent

While we’ve had a few days of winter weather, I am glad to say the folks at Pocantico have weathered the storms and are anxiously awaiting the arrival of spring!

This month has been a busy one with several guests sharing their knowledge with our students. We appreciate the visit from Broadway actress Patti Murin who shared her experience with our middle school students. It was a wonderful discussion for the many who will be participating in our upcoming musical production as they learned more about the industry.



We also had a visit from author Jason Edwards. He brought his sense of humor and shared with our students how he goes about writing his books and he helped students develop a story of their own right there in our auditorium!

And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention our youngest presenter, third grader Ruishan J. Born in China, Ruishan shared a slide show with her class detailing how her family celebrates the Lunar New Year. She did an amazing job, and we are all very proud of her work!

In looking ahead, we have some changes to our calendar that will take place next school year. Both Diwali, or the Festival of Lights celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, and Eid-al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting, will be days when school will not be in session for our students beginning with the 2024-25 school year. These days will be staff development and or conference days and will enable our families who celebrate these holidays time to do so. In addition, the Lunar New Year, or Chinese New Year, is now a public-school holiday and is noted in next year's calendar as well.

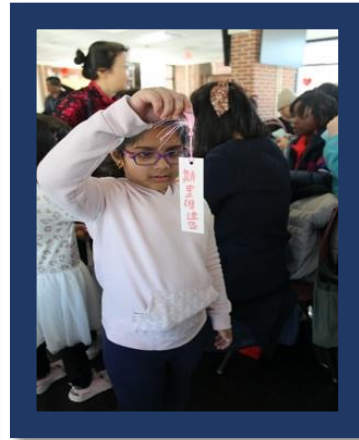
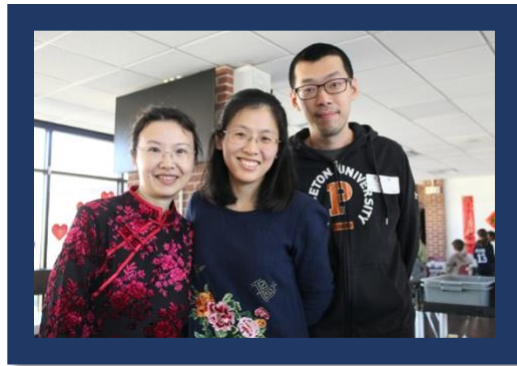
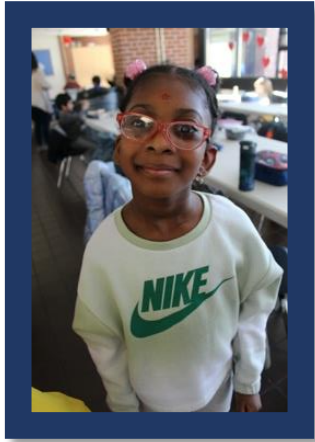
As we wait for spring's arrival, I look forward to the continued good work of our students and staff and know there are still some amazing experiences on the horizon as the school year continues.

Rich Calkins
Superintendent of Schools

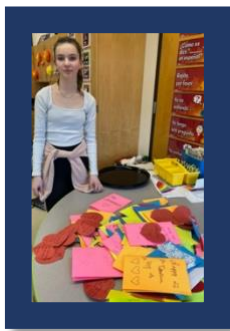
Let's celebrate the Lunar New Year!



The Lunar New Year holiday began on Feb. 10, and students and staff were able to enjoy a pre-celebration thanks to parent volunteers Wri Han, Chang Chang Liu and Su Liu, who were on hand during recent lunch periods to share some Chinese holiday traditions. Students enjoyed having some temporary tattoos, decorating bookmarks, receiving stickers and they got to see a dragon parade!



A Peek at POCO: Seasonal FUN!



The 10th annual Operation Valentine brought cheer to our friends at the Atria Briarcliff Manor. Handmade cards were created by our eighth graders and delivered to residents!

Students in our FACS had fun making some sweet Valentine's Day treats!



On Thursday, Feb. 15, our fifth graders had a fantastic visit to the United Nations! The students had an opportunity to see the General Assembly, as well as the 30 Articles of the Human Rights Declaration.



February 15 was National School Resource Officer Day and we want to thank SRO Pete Blume for all of the work he does to keep our school safe! Thank you Officer Pete!!

Upcoming Events

March 7, Board of Education Meeting, 7:30 p.m.

March 9, All County Band Concert, 1 p.m.

March 10, All County Chorus Concert, 1 p.m.

March 15, Superintendent's Conference Day/Parent-Teacher
Conferences, Staff Only

March 21, Board of Education Meeting, 7:30 p.m.

March 22, Middle School Play, 7 p.m.

March 23, Middle School Play, 3 p.m.

March 29, Good Friday, District Closed

For more information visit our website, www.pocanticohills.org

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