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MCC-Longview students helping launch balloon, art project

MCC-Longview engineering students and Dark Matter, a performance group that fuses science and musical artistry, will launch a unique project via a massive low-orbit weather balloon on Oct. 1.

Plans call for letting the balloon, equipped with a high-resolution camera, rise roughly 100,000 feet and to capturing data plus still photographs and video of the earth below and space above. The goal is to use the images to create a feature film, titled "Ascent," that Dark Matter will present on the 60-foot dome at the Gottlieb Planetarium in Union Station next spring. Although Dark Matter will be center stage at the premier, curator Daniel Eichenbaum said the real purpose of the project was to bring the community together for a unique art project.

"With help from MCC-Longview and the Blue Valley School District, Kansas City will have the opportunity to look up and watch this balloon fly and then look back down on ourselves," Eichenbaum said. During the balloon ascent, live video will be available online, and a GPS tracking device will be used to display the balloon's location via Google Maps.

The project was launched last summer, when Dark Matter received grant money from several Kansas City arts organizations. To manufacture the camera system and data pod that will be attached to the balloon, Daniel turned to the Dark Matter's resident astronomer Bob Riddle, who also is an instructor at MCC-Longview.

Riddle invited a number of MCC-Longview engineering students to help design and build a camera system that could survive a flight into space.

"You have to keep in mind that this was not just some kit we could put together," Riddle said. "We needed the engineering students to design, test and manufacture a pod that not only would work, but also met all

(Federal Aviation Administration) restrictions. This was something they had to build from the ground up.”

The MCC-Longview students were up to the challenge and went to work preparing for the launch.

“I was impressed,” Riddle said. “It was great to sit back and watch these students not just dive in and work on this project but to take ownership and really make this thing work out.”

Weather permitting, students will launch the balloon in the early morning hours on Oct. 1. Eichenbaum said he would announce the launch location 12 hours before the actual launch. For more information go to www.darkmatterkc.com.

<http://www.lsjournal.com/2011/09/28/73648/mcc-longview-students-helping.html>