



# Irving Students Design Award-Winning Space Colonies In Global NASA Contest



One year shy of the 50th moon landing anniversary, young space enthusiasts pack Dallas' Frontiers of Flight Museum. CEO Cheryl Sutterfield-Jones says this place will see three to four times the normal Saturday turnout.

"Today is Moon Day, the largest space exposition in Texas," she said. "We have over 35 exhibitors. We're expecting 1,500 people here today. We're going to be livestreaming with an astronaut from Russia."

And although a Soyuz cosmonaut's an out-of-this-world deal here, some local kids at the museum are international stars in their own right. Two teams from the Irving-based afterschool group DiscoverSTEM took top prizes for their space station designs in the NASA Ames Space Settlement Contest.

## Spaceberg's colony

Bilal Alishah, an incoming sixth-grader at Plano's Murphy Middle School, says learning that his team Spaceberg won was the "best way to wake me up." The team of seven students claimed one of several first place awards in the worldwide contest in their age group.

"My mom told me that I won first prize," he said. "When I woke up from sleep, she showed me the email immediately."

Bilal says teams had to create an orbiting space colony for 5,000 people. Spaceberg built a black-and-gold 3D model that sort of looks like a stack of snowflakes, each level including rooms for living and working.

"My focus was supply chain because supplies are the most important thing," Bilal said.

Colonists, though, cannot live by food and water alone. That's why the task of 10-year-old teammate Mikael Kahn's was entertainment. He came up with an observation tower.

"Like the only reason I would want to go into space is to see, like, the stars and planets," Mikael said. "So it's kind of a place where you can view all the sorts of things there."

## Spacelandia's honorable mention

At the Frontiers of Flight Museum, another project was on display by the other award-winning group of students from Irving.

Team Spacelandia designed a colony with a protective outer shell and a middle layer of water, for insulation and sustenance. Oxygen's produced from hydroponic strains of nutrient-rich algae, the same single-celled marine plant responsible for 80 percent of the earth's oxygen.

Team member Yusra Kahn's responsibility was to manage vital goods coming into the base, and waste leaving it.

"It basically looks like a hammer," he explained. "On one side it catches supplies from Earth and the other side, it shoots out the waste and shoots it over to Earth so that it disintegrates in the atmosphere."

Yusra's team also earned an award in the NASA competition of 10,000 students who submitted 2,500 entries worldwide. Judges gave Spacelandia an honorable mention. Yusra's won other awards before, but nothing international.

"I was also really happy about getting honorable mention because it's better than nothing, right?"

Proud parents of these kids view honorable mention more favorably. Many encouraged their kids to get involved with DiscoverSTEM to broaden their interests, have fun with kids their own age and frankly, to add something impressive to the college application.

Sameena Karmally says there are all kinds of benefits for these students, including her 11 year-old, Zakaria Shaikh, who's on the Spacelandia team.

"At his age they have to try everything," she said. "I feel like the world is becoming more interconnected, even though we still need to specialize in things. It doesn't hurt to have someone who's good at science and understands science but also is a great communicator."

Zak said he wasn't interested until his mom brought up the idea. "Then I started getting very interested because it's a cool topic," he said.

Zak and his teammates think it's pretty cool to be the only Texans this year to win awards in this international contest.

