UMES delegation tours NASA's Kennedy Space Center

Three UMES students, accompanied by two faculty members, toured NASA's Kennedy Space Center this past summer as participants in a program to encourage the study of science and related fields.

Dr. Madhumi Mitra, a UMES professor of biology and environmental science, described the trip as a professional development opportunity where she believes participants came away "with ideas and inspiration for exhibits and exhibit design."

The three undergraduates were: Theophilus Okra of Princess Anne, a junior in aviation science; Yasmin Roye of Cheltenham, Md., a sophomore in biology; and Amit Sharma of Salisbury, a senior in chemistry.

Sharma, Roye and Okra were among 50 UMES students who applied and subsequently chosen from a pool of five finalists interviewed by Mitra and Dr. Abhijit Nagchaudhuri, a UMES mechanical engineering professor, who accompanied them to Florida.

The tour included the Space Station Processing Facility labs, the Saturn V facility and the Vehicle Assembly Building. The students met and had lunch with astronaut Donald A. Thomas as well as saw the "rocket garden," the Journey to Mars exhibit and the Atlantis pavilion.

UMES students, from left, Amit Sharma, Yasmin Roye and Theo Okra tour the Kennedy Space Center.

Okra said he has changed his mind about pursuing a career as a pilot and now aspires to become an astronaut.

Roye described the experience as "surreal to step into NASA laboratories that are hardly any different than the ones I learn in every day at school."

"It put into perspective that I am truly on my way to becoming a professional in the science world," Roye said. "A research career has always been an option for me, but now I am considering it more and more."

Roye said she was unaware "how invested NASA is to Mars exploration, it being their main focus."

Mitra said the goals of the all-expense paid trip were: gaining a familiarity with NASA's plans for human travel and settlement of Mars; establishing connections with practicing and retired-expert NASA engineers and scientists; increasing knowledge and confidence for teaching science in the classroom and at Wings of Eagles Discovery Center in Horseheads, N.Y. north of Elmira (which coordinated the trip) and for the educators, getting firsthand experience with research-based curriculum design and development.

The UMES students, who received a $250 stipend, will be submitting to the Wings center reports summarizing their experiences along with ideas for the design and contents they think should be included in the Mars Base Eagle exhibit.

"UMES has been a partner on a USDA-funded bioenergy grant" in collaboration with the Wings center, Mitra said. It "was nurtured from then on and Dr. Nagchaudhuri and I currently are serving as their advisers on their new NASA grant."

"We are doing this to help our students get exposure to NASA's resources pertaining to Mars," she said.

Mitra said she, Nagchaudhuri and the students also will initiate on-campus activities to build awareness about NASA resources, advance-study opportunities and careers available to those who choose to major in science, technology, engineering and math.