

R.I. Baker Grade 6 students reach for the stars

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James Durbano, is an astronomer for hire from High River, who specializes in helping students reach for the stars.

Last Thursday morning, Grade 6 students at R.I. Baker Middle School in Coaldale visited the Astrodome — a mobile planetarium. According to Durbano — the innovative, educative and entertaining planetarium

utilizes a 20-feet by 13-feet inflatable dome and a digital projection system.

It can project any type of educational programming on the inside of the dome and transform it into an amazing immersive environment for the audience. The planetary dome can accommodate an entire class of students (approximately 45 young children or 35 adults) but can travel and be deployed to a different location every day.

It's great for schools, nature centres, summer camps, community groups and is available for community and corporate events, conferences and even birthday parties.

"Grade 6 students all across the province learn about astronomy. It's a unit called Sky Science. I visit a lot of schools in southern and central Alberta, visiting with Grade 6 students to help them along with their study of Sky Science," said Durbano, just before meeting up with another group of excited students.

Students, Durbano explained, learn about constellations, phases of the moon and planets.

Durbano noted Astronomy For Hire is his own brainchild of an inspirational and educational business and Astrodome is one of the services offered through astrodome.ca.

"When I was much younger, I had an interest in astronomy and it just sort of grew from there. I studied astronomy in university and I became a science teacher. Teaching is pretty good but I enjoy doing this more. It's still teaching — it's just that I don't have to do all the marking and parent/teacher interviews and such," joked Durbano, adding he's still teaching but in a different way.

"It's a lot of fun and I enjoy doing it."

Durbano said the Astrodome is a digital planetarium and he uses a computer and a projector.

"The image is going through a fisheye lens, so it spreads out the image everywhere inside. It's immersive and it surrounds you. The computer is doing all sorts of calculations to make sure all the planets are plotted in their exact correct position for the time and date that I'm showing. There's a lot of technology in there happening to make a rather realistic looking view of the sky. It's pretty neat stuff," said Durbano.

Other astronomy enthusiasts like Durbano have took to the road with travelling planetariums including one in Winnipeg, MN.

"One of the students from my last presentation had apparently used to live in Winnipeg and she said she's been in the exact same type of planetarium. Which is kind of interesting because I'm aware of this fellow in Winnipeg, who has done this," said Durbano, adding there's a few people with small independent businesses with a mobile planetarium.

Some science centres, Durbano said, also have travelling planetariums once and a while.

"It's the sort of thing a science centre might do. Offer a planetarium that visits schools and helps students with their studies."

Durbano said Astrodome also paid a visit earlier last week to Sunnyside School.

"I'm all over southern Alberta and central Alberta and lots of small towns, which is really nice," noted Durbano.

"I like to go to the small towns, the rural towns and visit with them."

