



Photographs courtesy of A-Man

AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ACHIEVERS NETWORK

Kezia Osborne still remembers the day 11 years ago when she first laid eyes on Sirius B.

“I was shocked!” she said. “It was like a dream come true.”

Osborne, now 28, was a teenager at the time, with all the pop culture interests of her peers. But the object of her affection was neither a hip hop idol nor rock star. Sirius B, which takes its name from the brightest star in the night sky, is a prototype of NASA’s international space station – the largest artificial satellite orbiting the earth.

She spent countless hours with Sirius B, simulating space travel, conducting experiments and communicating with “mission control”. The station – a tricked-out silver-colored arch about the size of an RV – is the crowning jewel of the International Science and Discovery Learning Center, a project of the African-American Male Achievers Network, or A-MAN. With the aim of increasing the number of African-American students interested in and committed to careers in science and technology, A-MAN brought Sirius B to the Center as a flashing, blinking interactive lure, intended to hook its visitors with the thrill of science.

It worked for Osborne. “I’ve always loved science, even as young child,” she said on a recent afternoon at the Center, where she now volunteers as a teacher and mentor. “But until A-MAN, I’d never thought much about space, about the world outside of our world.” To this day, Osborne credits the organization’s focus on space with opening her mind “to a whole new way of thinking about science and about the world.”

Osborne has since earned a college degree in chemistry and a master’s in multicultural education. Today she teaches 8TH grade science, still with the passion for astronomy that she developed as an A-MAN student. In the midst of recounting her experiences with the program, Osborne paused and smiled at a particularly pleasing recollection. “I got to meet a lady astronaut,” she said. “That was *amazing*.”

A-MAN and its science center are the brainchild of Bettye Walker, a former elementary school principal, and her husband, Hildreth “Hal”



Walker, who in 1969 helped create the first laser-driven measurement of the distance between earth and the moon, an effort recognized in a permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian.

The Walkers founded A-MAN 18 years ago as an after-school program to supplement the science instruction provided in traditional classrooms. “Our particular population doesn’t always see itself in the science professions,” Hal Walker said. “If we can get them to see the connection between what’s on the page and what’s out in the world, we’ve done our job.”

Today, the program operates out of an impressive 7,500-square foot space in Inglewood, serving more than 1,000 elementary and high school students each year. Both boys and girls participate; the organization’s name is not meant to reflect a gender bias but rather, is an homage to the many men, who – like former Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley – volunteered their time in the early days of the program. They helped build an organization whose participants have a 100 percent high school graduation rate and an 85 percent college graduation rate.

Certainly, part of the program’s success is due to the Walker’s keen focus on the joy of learning. But cultural pride plays a key role as well, reminding the students that they can do anything to which they set their minds. An exhibit featuring photos and news accounts of



the Tuskegee Airmen graces one wall, while brightly patterned kente cloth covers the chairs at Sirius B's "mission control". And it was the Walkers who named the space station Sirius B, a star whose existence, many scientists believe, was first recorded by the Dogon, an ethnic group in Mali, West Africa.

An Ahmanson Foundation grant, along with funding from several other supporters, has helped the Center in multiple ways. The first improvement was an upgrade of the Articulated Microscopy Interface, or AMI, one of six hands-on learning stations housed in the space station. Enhancements to the AMI include a more powerful microscope and a new set of slides for students to scrutinize, including a human tonsil, human brain tissue, blue green algae (the label also tells students that they are looking at "pond scum" – common in stagnant water) and a truffle ("edible fungi used in seasoning").

The grant also provided for an improved teleconferencing system and a computer lab complete with 22 desktop computers, all with wireless Internet access. "Many of our students don't have computers at home," Hal Walker said. "This is a big advance for them."

For Keizia Osborne, who has seen the Center grow and change through the years, the recent upgrades are welcome improvements. "I'm just so glad to see the Center serving so many children," she said. "I want their experience to be as enriching as mine."