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Florosa Fifth-Graders Pumped About Parachutes

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Parachutist trainer Steve Jones gives Florosa fifth-graders a chance to view the force of wind up close as he flies his parachute from their playground.

Teacher De De McGlynn and her math students examine the honeycomb structure of the parachute and count its strings.

Jones brings his parachute up in the air once more, to the delight of the students.

Jones shows the students different parachute shapes, explaining that round parachutes are more difficult to control.

The students enjoyed timing mini-parachutes as they hit the floor with different sized payloads. The ceiling is covered with a giant round parachute.

It's one thing to learn

about the aerodynamics in a book, but when you watch up close as a professional parachutist catches wind in the honeycomb structure of his parachute, you get a whole new appreciation of the physics involved.

For De De McGlynn's fifth grade math class at Florosa, math and science came to life Tuesday morning. They began their class with a fun experiment, dropping parachutes with different size payloads from ladders and timing them as they hit the floor. A real parachute hung from the ceiling, adding to their excitement.

After the experiment, they were treated to a lesson on parachutes by Steve Jones, a retired Air Force parachutist who now trains new recruits. He showed them a model based on Leonardo Da Vinci's original design and gave them a quick overview of parachuting, explaining the formula used by parachutists to calculate wind drift, so they land in the proper "drop zone." (D=KAV, where D = drift, K = the low drift constant of 3m/sec, A= altitude and V= wind velocity expressed in knots.)

The class then convened outside where he demonstrated how his own parachute works, flying it above their heads like a kite and allowing the children to feel its material and explore its structure. Each string, he explained, is strong enough to hold 500 lbs. When he uses a motorized fan, he can actually take off from the ground and fly at about 25 mph.

The students were fascinated by the parachute and by the events of the day. "I like when you have hands-on experiences," said Alex Soto. "This is the biggest thing we've done so far."

Maya Smith's favorite part of the lesson was "seeing him bring it up," while Dionte Lett was happy about everything they did that day. "It was all great: it's hard to choose!" he said.

McGlynn attended the two-day summer workshop at the Air Force Armament Museum, which inspired the experiment. She was also the recipient of one of the $1000 grants given by the National Defense Industry Association. On the evening of the awards reception, she asked around and found someone who lent her a huge round parachute to hang on her ceiling for the students to enjoy.

McGlynn asks her students to write in their math journals daily, encouraging them to be creative as they write about the lessons they learned that day. With the terminology that Steve Jones used to explain parachuting - including words like oscillation, porosity, clinometer, payload and drop zone

- their lesson not only got them excited about math and science, it was an excellent vocabulary builder, too.

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