

Challenger Learning Center poised to move

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June Scobee Rodgers looks at a portrait of her late husband and Space Shuttle Challenger commander Francis R. 'Dick' Scobee at a press conference at the Scobee Planetarium at San Antonio College on April 26, 2010. John Davenport/Express-News

Though the Space Shuttle Challenger's 1986 launch ended in tragedy, two space education centers may come together to continue the Challenger's legacy in San Antonio.

On Monday, officials with the Challenger Learning Center of San Antonio and San Antonio College announced the center likely will move to the college campus, to be housed as part of an expansion of Scobee Planetarium.

The move is dependent on acquiring funding, though officials were not ready to release cost estimates or a formal timeline. SAC President Robert Zeigler said the move could be completed within a couple of years.

In August, the Challenger center vacated the building on Brooks City-Base, where it had been for nearly a

decade, to make way for an extension of South New Braunfels Avenue.

The center was dedicated to inspiring students in kindergarten through 12th grade to study math, science and technology through simulations of Mission Control at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston and an orbiting space station. The local center — one of more than 40 around the world under the umbrella of the Challenger Center for Space Science Education — has continued to operate since vacating Brooks City-Base by taking activities to school campuses, said Shelia Klein, executive vice president for operations for the center.

The combination of the Challenger center and the planetarium — named for Francis “Dick” Scobee, a former SAC student and NASA astronaut who died aboard the Challenger — may become a one-stop space education center.

“My sweet husband will be mighty proud that his college loved him so much that they named the planetarium after him and are now bringing the Challenger Learning Center that we built in memory of the Challenger's Teacher in Space mission,” said June Scobee Rodgers, Scobee's widow and the founding director of the Challenger Center for Space Science Education.

Klein said the center's main mission is to ignite middle-schoolers' interest in science and math to propel them into higher education and into associated careers.

But the benefits could reach students already at SAC as well. Those studying topics such as astronomy and physics may find access to the center educationally rewarding, Zeigler said.

“The planetarium is already a great magnet for people in the community, for students in elementary school and middle school that come to the college,” Zeigler said. “Having the center here will just expand those opportunities for public school people, for our community, and we think that it will also enhance our own instructional programs. So there is a kind of synergy here between us and the Challenger center.”

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