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Heritage Elementary first-grader Aiden Guillen reads the newspaper headlines about the first moon landing during his class visit to the Christa McAuliffe Planetarium on Wednesday.

EDUCATION

Out of this world

First-graders get up close with cosmos

BY JON POMPIA
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

A gaggle of excited Heritage Elementary School first graders took a trip deep into the vast and enthralling expanses of the cosmos Wednesday.

All without ever leaving the warm and safe confines of Centennial High School.

With Mike Bentley serving as a particularly enthusiastic star guide and host, the children sat enraptured inside Centennial's Christa McAuliffe Planetarium as gorgeously captivating images of outer space were projected onto the dome above them.

"Here, our skies are never cloudy," Bentley told the youngsters, whose visit complemented a "Journeys" literacy curriculum and the book "Let's Go To The Moon."

Fittingly, the "magnificent desolation" of Earth's natural satellite was among the heavenly destinations the first graders virtually toured.

Right alongside "Buzz" Aldrin, Michael Collins and Neil Armstrong.

A fantastic voyage preceded by the reading of a July 1969 headline in *The Pueblo Chieftain*



Host Michael Bentley (standing) explains what Heritage Elementary School first-graders are about to see as they settle into the reclining seats of Centennial High School's planetarium.

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touting the historical achievement and a thought-provoking question from Bentley.

"If I told you that you were going someplace that you've never been, but you might not ever be able to come back, would you go?"

The vote seemed split. "To those who said 'yes' and would go no

matter what, you are the explorers. Congratulations," Bentley said.

"And those who would stay home, you still contribute a whole lot, because there were a lot of people on the ground, hundreds and hundreds, who supported these three guys in space for 10 days."

Just as it did in 1969, this particular excursion ended with a capsule splashdown, which unfolded before the

children in a now iconic film clip.

"Good," came a response from a relieved observer. "They are good Eagles," a reference to the Heritage mascot.

As the engrossing galactic junket continued, the tykes were bombarded with brilliant images of all that makes the universe awe-inspiring, mysterious and magical.

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“Oohs,” “aahs” and “wows” filled the chamber as lifelike representations of planets — some with tornadoes, volcanoes and other phenomena — stars, comets, nebulas, meteors and brilliant explosions illuminated the darkness, expanding young minds in the sensational process.

The most joyously clamorous response,

however, was reserved for a finale selected by the Heritage cadets themselves: a dizzying, bordering on vertiginous, virtual ride on an astral roller coaster, and a twisting and turning jaunt straight into the heart of a spinning mobius strip.

Bentley, who accompanied the dazzling display with informative facts

and data — “What makes you up is star stuff, straight from space” — capped the morning with a bit of advice for those aspiring to someday reach the heavens for real.

“You have to be pretty good in math, and pretty good in science,” he explained. “And you have to listen to your teachers.”

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