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MCC profile

NASA workshop proves a rare treat for budding biotechnology scientist



By Sally Mesarosh

Upon arriving at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Mesa Community College student Greg Howard was immediately assigned a mission: to form a theoretical space exploration company and build a rover out of a basic robotics kit in about a day.

Howard, a Tempe resident, quickly teamed up with nine other college students from across the country to complete the project. They took on the roles of project manager, marketing manager, financial officer and a variety of engineering positions.

Although the team ran out of money and time, in the end they successfully built a rover that beat three other teams tasked with the same mission.

A total of 43 students from across the country were involved in the rover workshop.

"I was really excited when we won," Howard said. "The final product wasn't what we envisioned, but it was functional. The whole experience was amazing, and winning was just the icing on the cake."

Howard, 26, learned about the National Community College Aerospace Scholars onsite workshop through his involvement in MCC's Omicron Beta Chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, an honor society for two-year community college students.

After completing an intensive five-week online course, Howard was chosen for the NASA workshop based on his module scores and overall mission design.

"I was pretty ecstatic," said Howard, who grew up in Show Low and now lives in Tempe. "NASA represents the

apex in scientific pursuits."

Howard is majoring in molecular biology at MCC and has plans to be a synthetic biologist in the biotechnology field.

"This is a fantastic opportunity for Greg," said Duane Oakes, faculty director of the MCC Center for Community & Civic Engagement and Phi Theta Kappa adviser.

"We have a great tradition of Phi Theta Kappa Students from MCC being selected and they all say this is one of their life-changing experiences.

One of our past students now works for NASA so his opportunity is a great stepping stone for our students."

Howard has already applied for an internship and would love to work as an intern for NASA researching bone density in long-duration space travel. He currently works part-time as a data processor, is a full time student, and is also a husband and a father of a two-year old son.

In his spare time he ghostwrites science-fiction novels, a fitting sideline that enriched his NASA experience.

He said the workshop taught him teamwork, accountability, leadership and the importance of keeping an open mind.

For Howard, the best part of being at NASA was the opportunity to watch a spacewalk from the International Space Station in Mission Control Center.

"We got up early and went to Mission Control to watch the spacewalk live," Howard said. "Not many people get to do that."

The worst part of his NASA experience, revealed Howard:

"Having to leave!"



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