

Easton center awarded NASA grant

By MICHELLE MERLIN

OF THE MORNING CALL |

SEP 15, 2016 | 9:26 AM



The Nurture Nature Center displays a suspended sphere. The sphere will play a role in a new, NASA-funded program at the Easton facility. (nurture nature center / contributed photo)

EASTON — Kevin Bacon and the Nurture Nature Center in Easton might be a few degrees of separation closer than you'd think.

The Nurture Nature Center won a NASA grant for its program 6 Degrees of Influence: Understanding the Interconnectedness of Earth Systems, which pulls from the "six degrees of separation from Kevin Bacon" idea to show students how global issues such as arctic ice and dust from the Sahara Desert aren't so removed from their daily lives.

It will use the center's Science on a Sphere program, in which images can be projected on a suspended globe to show changes to the earth over time. The six degrees program also will include an art component.

The NASA grant of \$420,000 covers two years of the program, which will be geared toward middle school students. Undergraduate interns from Lehigh University will be involved and help plan and teach parts of the program.

"We had been trying to find ways to engage students and the public around these issues that seem very far from the local environment, so why should they care about what's happening to arctic sea ice if we're here in Pennsylvania?" said Kathryn Semmens, science director at the Nurture Nature Center.

The program was one of nine awarded through NASA's Competitive Program for Science Museums, Planetariums and NASA Visitor Centers Plus Other Opportunities. More than 70 institutions applied, and awarded grants announced in June totaled nearly \$10 million. The project begins in February. Beverly Girten, director of institutional engagement in the office of education at NASA headquarters, said the Easton project stood out because it presented a difficult concept in creative and accessible manner.

"It built strong connections between global issues and local interest. We thought that made it highly relevant," she said. "Another thing that was attractive is it was laid out in a way that seemed like it would be able to be replicated in other settings."

The Nurture Nature Center is partnering on the project with the Maryland Science Center, Lehigh University, Morgan State University and the outside evaluation firm People Places and Design Research. The Maryland Science Center also has a Science on a Sphere program.

Lehigh University will help develop the program and train students at Lehigh and Morgan State as interns.

Joan Ramage-Macdonald, an associate professor of earth and environmental science at Lehigh who's working on the project, said student interns will be driving parts of the program.

She said each of the undergraduate interns will be responsible for the content in one series of ideas and be charged with showing how they're interconnected. She envisions a summer research experience for the students that includes an opportunity to follow up during the regular semester and demonstrating the project at the science center.

"We hope they will get engaged in science at the undergraduate level and be interested in continuing to graduate school or careers in science and be really good role models for middle school students," Ramage-Macdonald said.

mmerlin@mcalls.com

twitter @michellejmerlin

610-820-6533