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CUTLINE: NASA astronaut Danny Olivas recently traveled into space with a Flat Stanley created by West U. Elementary students. Pictured (left to right) are fifth-grade students who traveled in June to Florida to the space shuttle launch site: Jun Pack, Zach Pearson, James Olivas and Connor Bradshaw, along with Olivas and science teacher Maureen Pflugfelder.

Students Experience Out-of-this-World Adventure *Area astronaut takes West U. Elementary into space*

HOUSTON, TEXAS, September 13, 2007 — Through determination and imagination, fourth graders at West U. Elementary hitched a ride into space for Flat Stanley. Their reward: an out-of-this-world space adventure.

If you're not familiar with Flat Stanley, he is the central character in an international literacy and communications activity through which students dress and decorate a paper Stanley, thus the first name 'Flat'. After writing several journal entries on Stanley's behalf, off he goes to visit a new destination, oftentimes another school, faraway friend or relative. There, Stanley's hosts complete the journal with stories about his adventures, then return Stanley to his point of origin, oftentimes with a photograph to commemorate the trip.

While Stanley has traveled the world in an envelope, West U. Elementary students have likely made history by sending him into space.

Thanks to NASA astronaut John "Danny" Olivas, parent of West U. Elementary fifth-grader James Olivas, third-grader Anthony and first-grader Joseph, Flat Stanley was given a lift aboard the Atlantis Space Shuttle mission that launched on June 8. Dozens of West U. Elementary students and families traveled to Florida to witness the historic launch of "Astronaut Dan" — Olivas' nickname by area youth, who he has coached and known as a church and group leader — that marked the 118th shuttle mission and the 21st mission to visit the International Space Station.

For his travels, Flat Stanley was dressed strikingly similar to Maureen Pflugfelder, a fifth-grade teacher at the school. Mirroring this popular teacher's passion for the sciences, Stanley wore a white lab coat, accessorized by Pflugfelder's twinkle-in-the-eye grin and funky glasses. Traveling light, Flat Stanley packed a letter bearing hundreds of well-wishing signatures and photos of him with each West U. Elementary fourth-grade class.

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Olivas and Stanley recently visited West U. Elementary to share highlights about their space travels with the now fifth-grade student body, captivating them with a video and discussion about the mission's objectives; living, eating and working in the absence of gravity; and re-entering the earth's atmosphere at 25 times the speed of sound. Drawing a parallel between space life and student life, Olivas emphasized the importance of teamwork, both in space missions and school endeavors.

Before fielding questions, Astronaut Dan concluded his presentation by encouraging students to “find what you like to do and pursue it,” noting that his childhood fascination with science paved an eventual road into space.

So what did Flat Stanley bring back as a memento of his adventure? A commemorative certificate from NASA, framed with the very photos and words of encouragement that had traveled millions of miles during an once-in-a-lifetime learning experience.

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About West University Elementary School

For the second consecutive year, West U. Elementary recently received the Texas Business and Education Coalition Honor Roll School Award, earned by less than five percent of the more than 8,000 public schools in Texas. This honor — coupled with the school's top rating as an Exemplary School tied to the more rigorous testing standards of TAKS instated by the TEA four years ago — recognizes West U. Elementary as one of the very best public schools in Texas.