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Stars not out of reach for Maui teachers, their students

January 31, 2012

By MELISSA TANJI - Staff Writer (mtanji@mauinews.com) , The Maui News

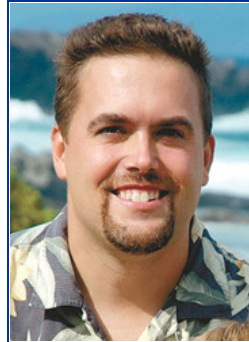
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Two Maui teachers will have students learning and aiming for the stars - literally.

Christopher Border of Maui Preparatory Academy and Kathryn O'Connor of Lokelani Intermediate School were two Hawaii educators chosen this year to participate in a program that allows them to conduct NASA research with their students.

The NASA/IPAC (Infrared Processing and Analysis Center) Teacher Archive Research Program, also involves other teachers across the nation, their students and scientists at the IPAC, which is funded by NASA and on the campus of California Institute of Technology. Nearly 50 teachers applied for the 12 advertised spots.

Article Photos



Christopher Border



O'Connor, an 8th-grade math teacher at the Kihei intermediate school, is excited about the challenge and noted that she has been interested in astronomy since college and oversees an after-school astronomy club for students.

"I feel like this task will be something that can help me grow as a teacher and as a human," she said. "I feel like doing this project will benefit my students, if anything, just for them to see that tasks may be difficult but if you believe in what you are doing and work hard enough, anything is possible. . . . Hopefully this allows students to see all the opportunities in the science field."

Border, an upper-school mathematics and science teacher at Maui Prep in Napili, said he has been moving toward more project-based learning and judged that this was an excellent opportunity to get

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students involved in working with authentic data using real research methods.

Groups of teachers are working on several different projects within the program. Both O'Connor, 30, and Border, 38, are in the same group working with scientist Ranga-Ram Chary at the Planck Data Center at the IPAC.

While the Maui students haven't been picked yet to participate, both Border and O'Connor have already been working hard setting up the framework for their projects. They recently met with their research team at the American Astronomical Society Winter meeting in Austin, Texas, in early January.

Border said that in his group, the teachers and students will be using archived data from the space-based Planck telescope, which was launched by the European Space Agency in 2009. The teachers and students will use the data to search for infrared sources that lie outside our galaxy.

They will be looking for sources that have gone previously unidentified.

"We will work to identify them and hopefully help astronomers better understand the structure of the universe," Border said.

O'Connor said the work will not involve looking through a telescope but using numerical data and using trigonometry and algebra equations to figure out what the numbers mean and what the objects are.

O'Connor said she is working with Maui High School to find former Lokelani Intermediate School students to work with her, because the math may be too complicated for her own middle school students.

O'Connor said she intends to apply her studies as well as use the NASA program as an example of how math is important to students in her classroom and her astronomy club.

"The kids ask me all the time when are they ever going to use this (math) information," she said. "I give them examples, but now I can share a real-life experience for me and give an authentic, firsthand response."

Border also still needs to pick his students for the project.

He said the program will give him a better understanding of astronomical research and help his students in the future.

"Astronomy and related fields are an excellent career opportunity for students on Maui to consider," he said. "Not only will this research be an important experience, but I will also be able to continue my relationship with the researchers and hopefully involve students in future research as well."

The teachers, students and researchers will correspond via biweekly teleconferences.

In the summer, the teachers and a small group of selected students will fly to Caltech for four days to work with their research colleague at the university.

A final presentation will be at the 2013 American Astronomical Society meeting.

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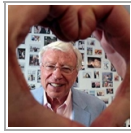
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