

Students dig chance to talk to scientists

BY RUTH CAMPBELL

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Elementary students from around Ector County Independent School District had a chance to talk to paleoanthropologists exploring the Rising Star cave system in South Africa in search of bones of ancient human relatives.

One of the Google Hangouts was at LBJ Elementary School Monday. Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne said there were several paleoanthropologists who had come out of an exploration just prior to talking to the students.

The scientists were from the Perot Museum of Nature and Science and National Geographic.

The partner institution for the Perot Museum was the University of Witwatersrand. Osborne said about 600 students participated. It was moderated by Andrew Montgomery of the Perot Museum.

The researchers included Marina Elliott, Becca Peixotto from the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, Anghard Brewer Gillham, Kerryn Warren and Kenieloe Mopyane, information from Osborne said.

The scientists talked about what they have found in the last couple of years and why it's important. They also took questions from students.

The scientists said in 2013, cavers who were exploring for fun found a bunch of bones underground in one of the cave systems and altered paleoanthropologist Lee Berger, who is a National Geographic explorer in residence.

Berger organized a big expedition and six of them went to South Africa to excavate the bones. In 2013-14, they bought out just over 1,500 bones. Since then, the scientists said they have been conducting expeditions and digging.

They think the bones are from *Homo naledi*.

The scientists said they wear jumpsuits or coveralls to protect themselves and try not to get too filthy, and also helmets because of the close spaces.

students, as well as a gifted and talented class.

"It's amazing. They were so excited. They did a lot of exploring ahead of time because they wanted to be prepared for today.

..." Holguin said.

Holguin added that this is an experience not every student gets. She added that the scientists, also called underground astronauts, have been on the cover of National Geographic.

"... We're very much a science-oriented school," Holguin said.

She added that this experience will build more of the students' knowledge and could prompt ideas to explore on their own.

Tommy Ratliff, a 9-year-old third grader, thought cave exploration would be "really cool."

He added that he likes dinosaurs, shark bones and digging.

"If I had a chance to do it, I would definitely do it," Ratliff said.

Third-grader Righlee McClendon, 8, asked one of the questions. She thought the scientists are really good at what they do.

"... I really wonder about if they've ever broke a bone," McClendon said.

She added that she doesn't want to explore caves.

Eight-year-old third-grader Lainey Wimberly wants to be an archeologist when she grows up.

"It gives me more information that I should never give up what I want to be," Wimberly said.

Vanessa Browner, a gifted and talented teacher, said she will be participating in professional development at the Perot Museum along with several other teachers this coming weekend. "I think it's great. It's amazing," Browner said of the Google Hangout. "I have several in here that want to be archeologists when they grow up."

Osborne said he recently met Peixotto, director and research scientist of the Center for the Exploration of the Human Journey at the Perot Museum in Dallas, at a science, technology, engineering and mathematics conference in Austin.

Peixotto was one of the scientists in the Google Hangout, he said.

“We talked about ways that we can ... bring more experiences to kids.

Then we talked about doing a live hangout, as well as how we can build more partnerships with the Perot Museum.

The Perot is very interested in helping us with opportunities for kids, so this is just the start of a long, ongoing partnership,” Osborne said.

LBJ Principal Alisha Holguin said there were about 75 students in the library to take part in the conversation. She said there were first-, second-, third- and fourth-grade

Brower added that it’s important for the students to see how real life and future goals connect to what they’re learning in the classroom. “... Seeing somebody actually in the field is great,” she said. “It’s a great opportunity for all of us; myself, too, because I want to be an archeologist when I grow up.” The Google Hangout was offered through the district’s PICK Education program, which is part of the **ECISD** Innovation Department.



(Left) Righlee McClendon, an 8-year-old third-grader at LBJ Elementary School, asks a question of scientists in South Africa Monday via Google Hangout.

(Right) Logan Najera, an 8-year-old third grader listens to answers from scientists in South Africa Monday in the LBJ Elementary library as part of a Google Hangout through PICK Education.

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