

[Brandon](#) > [News](#)

## Having A Blast

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Go to this link for a cool slide show: [http://www2.tbo.com/static/photo\\_gallery/tbocom-special-reports-photo-gallery-rocket-class/](http://www2.tbo.com/static/photo_gallery/tbocom-special-reports-photo-gallery-rocket-class/)

BRANDON - Martha Bleakley's grandfather helped design the water purification system for the Apollo space missions.

The 21-year-old University of South Florida senior is keeping up that tradition by teaching rocketry and other scientific tidbits to youngsters.

She is a part-time instructor with Mad Science of Tampa Bay, a business franchise that holds classes and demonstrations and entertains at birthday parties.

"The purpose is to get kids interested in science. It is no longer being emphasized in schools like it once was," Bleakley said. "We want to spike a child's interest and make it fun, rather than just trying to pass a test."

Bleakley and colleague Jessica Dugas taught classes for two weeks in early August at Center Place Fine Arts and Civic Association.

What better way to spend the final few days of summer vacation than building rockets and watching them be launched skyward?

"It is really cool," said student Jeb Massaro, 8, of Dover. "I really wanted a rocket and never had one."

The rockets the students built didn't have explosive engines or igniters to launch them. Bleakley and Dugas passed out sheets showing students how to turn their static models into soaring spacecraft, if their parents agreed to take the projects to the next level.

"They are fun, but they are dangerous," Bleakley said. "We don't want them to explode randomly."

However, the two rockets launched during a field trip the last day of class packed a serious punch.

With a swoosh of their ignited gunpowder engines, both soared to about 300 feet before their nose cones separated, their parachutes deployed and the rockets drifted back to Earth at the South Brandon Little League fields that served as the class' test range.

"That was fun for the parents as well," said Mike Nasthas of Tampa, who attended the launch with his wife, Olga, and daughter, Angelina, 7, a student in the classes.

"It's an experience the kids won't have otherwise," Olga Nasthas said. "It is a fun way to spend your summer."

"It was pretty neat," Angelina said of the classes. "I hope I can launch my rocket."

She lobbied her parents for a trip after the launch to a hobby shop, where she could pick up items she needed to send her rocket soaring.

The message got through.

"That's where we're heading right now," Olga Nasthas said.

The 17-inch-tall rockets the students built came in kits with silver cardboard tubes the diameter of a quarter and purple plastic fins. Having the students assemble the parts was meant to teach them the anatomy of rockets, what makes them fly and some basic aerodynamics.

It was a lesson that hit the spot with Jeb's dad, Jeff Massaro, whose son Jayce, 6, also attended the classes.

"They like tinkering with things and science," he said. "It gives them something different to do."

Nikki Stieben of Riverview thought rocket class was a perfect way for her son Zachary, 7, to spend some of his summer break.

"He really enjoys science," she said. "And it is just two weeks instead of the whole summer, and with the cost of gas, that's good. Plus, it is indoors when it is so hot outside."

Zach approved.

"It was pretty fun," he said, adding he wanted to grow up to be a "spaceman."

Alexandra Prete, 7, of Apollo Beach, hoped in vain for a mishap during the launches.

"I like to watch them explode. They are like fireworks," she said.

Bleakley and Dugas plan to make teaching their careers. Dugas, 23, just graduated from Florida College. Both thought working for Mad Science would be a great way to get teaching experience.

"It is fun, and it is challenging," Bleakley said. "They give you lessons, but they don't teach you how to deal with 25 kids at a time."

She said teachers' expectations are simple.

"I've had kids eat parts, put them down their pants," Bleakley said. "If they keep them out of their mouths, it's fine."

The pair kept the lessons simple. They called shock cords "elastic thingies" and adapted other technical references to their audience.

When students were directed to glue folded paper anchors to the insides of their rockets, Bleakley said, "Squish it as hard as you can and count to 60. If you can't count to 60, count to 10 a bunch of times."

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