

## Who's better at science? Heritage High clubs also teach responsibility and leadership

The boys of MOB and the girls of STARS seek to learn and make friends by making the subject fun.

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NEWPORT NEWS - It's a battle of the sexes as two Heritage High School clubs in [Newport News](#) compete with their own and NASA challenge experiments.

— The Men of Brilliance gathered on a recent Wednesday to tackle their latest challenge: coming up with plant habitats for a NASA lunar expedition.

The young men crowded around desks, wielding glue guns and threading rubber tubing through plastic bins, checking calculations and plans as they worked.

"It doesn't have to look pretty. It just has to work," instructed science teacher Don Ouellette, the group's adviser.

Two halls away, the Scientifically Talented Ambitious Revolutionary Sisterhood also worked on NASA plant habitats, peering closely at clear round spheres holding small sprouts kept moist with water run from intravenous bags hanging overhead.

The two Heritage High School science clubs are in head-to-head competition with their NASA challenge experiments. They're also trying to outdo each other with entries for a coming science fair.

Members of the fledgling girls-only STARS predict that they'll mop up.

The message back from Men of Brilliance: Bring it on.

Four years ago, neither club existed. Men of Brilliance — MOB — was created first, born of concern for male students who were falling behind in their math and science classes, Ouellette said.

"The goal was to take a mix of kids we thought could benefit from a science club," he said.

At the time, Ouellette was a second-year teacher who turned to education after a career in the Coast Guard. He and administrators wanted to focus on leadership, as well as science, in the boys-only club.

"We looked at the school programs and realized we didn't have a lot of minority males participating in them," Heritage administrator Dewey Ray say.

"It's no secret that males, especially socioeconomically disadvantaged males, are at the bottom of the ladder," Ouellette said. "The girls aren't. We've pounded it into the girls that they are smart about science and math, but what did we do in the process? We ignored the males. This is a way to improve the situation."

The first year, the club was The Men of the Future, but the boys who joined soon changed to the current name, which lends itself to both swagger and a snappy acronym.

The club started with about 15 boys, most of whom struggled with classes and more than one of whom had discipline problems. Few would have been considered leadership material, Ouelette said. Now most of the club members are pulling down A's and B's and hold leadership roles in other clubs and student government.

The club's president, senior Brandon Hawkins, agreed that the endeavor led to a turnaround for himself and others. He said he was "a bit of a troublemaker" before he joined the group. "Then I started taking it seriously," he said.

MOB is more than science and math, club members insisted. There is a strong push for responsibility and leadership.

"It's a lot of competition among ourselves. People with the best report cards get rewards, like tickets to games," he said. "A lot of people started with C's and D's, and now they're getting A's and B's."

The boys like spending social time together, he said. "We try to be like a brotherhood."

MOB started its science odyssey by conducting experiments on nearby Newmarket Creek, checking water quality on the estuary.

Ouellette said the first experiments were rudimentary but that MOB advanced since then.

Club members dream up their own science questions, then create experiments and call in experts to help, said Ryan Cruz, who led the club last year. They recently studied minerals and sediments in [Chesapeake Bay](#).

"When I started, I thought it was just water and fish," he said of the bay. "I didn't know there was so much detail."

Three years ago, club members began working on NASA science challenges. They've designed visors for spacesuits and worked on aerodynamics.

Cruz said the NASA problems and the club's own experiments brought home the importance of academics.

"I never thought much about math and science before," said Cruz, who plans to pursue a nursing degree after graduation.

For the women of STARS, math and science are favorite subjects, thanks in part to the school's single-gender chemistry and biology classes. Ray said the school began offering them three or four years ago in addition to mixed-gender classes. They've become popular, he said.

Last year, the girls clamored for their own science club but couldn't find an adviser. This year, everything fell into place, and 44 girls enrolled.

Junior Tara McKee was one.

"With the other clubs, it's recreation," she said. "This makes you think."

In addition to the NASA challenge and science fair entries, the girls also write research papers on science topics and are planning presentations of their work.

The president, senior Victoria Parker, said the girls were determined to show the world that girls were good at math and science. And like MOB, STARS compete against one another to see who can get the best grades.

Hawkins and his brethren said that they saluted the girls but that they're not cutting STARS any slack.

That's fine with the girls, Parker said.