

Near-space flight captures live images from 100,000 feet

Balloon contraption sails from West Beach to Buttonwillow

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"Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One!"

And with that the monstrous balloon, 6 feet in diameter and attached to two boxes with transmitters, launched from West Beach into the blue sky late Saturday morning at the climbing rate of about 1,000 feet per minute.

To capture live images of Central California's horizon from 100,000 feet, three nonprofit groups — the Santa Barbara Amateur Radio Club, Santa Barbara Hackerspace and Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History — sent cameras and other devices with GPS systems into the highest 1 percent of Earth's atmosphere.

Onlookers were able to track the balloon's path Saturday through Google Maps.

The project started as an idea by Blanca Garcia, at the time a junior at Santa Barbara High School.

Ms. Garcia, one of the select few members of the Quasar to Sea Stars work-study science program at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, chose to launch a contraption to stream video and capture stills of the earth's contours as her senior project.

Her months of hard work finally paid off as the balloon sailed practically straight into the atmosphere Saturday. Not everything went as planned, but participants called the initial stages a success.

"We had to improvise," the high school senior told the News-Press as she watched her project soar toward the clouds.

As soon as the balloon and payloads launched Saturday, many of the onlookers and participants headed immediately to their cars to follow the balloon's path.

The Natural History Museum's Quasar program, for which Blanca was selected back in eighth grade, handpicks five talented youths each year to go through the four-year program.

Over the course of the four years,

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MATT WIER / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Above, members of the Santa Barbara Amateur Radio Club and Santa Barbara Hackerspace assemble the payload of a weather balloon Saturday morning at West Beach. Below, the participants inflate the balloon, which was expected to reach 100,000 feet in altitude.



The weather balloon is launched for its trip to the edge of the atmosphere, where it took photographs of the Earth.

Device landed about four hours after launch

■ BALLOON

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professional scientists take the students under their wings, and students have a chance to explore various niches within the scientific field. Ms. Garcia aspires to continue her studies of math and physics at Columbia University next year.

The balloon was expected to expand to around 30 feet in diameter by the time it reached its anticipated altitude of 100,000 feet.

At that height, experts explained, the pressure factors would force it to pop, sending the equipment back down to earth at a rate of about 1,000 feet per minute—roughly the same as its climbing rate.

A parachute was to deploy as the

contraption dropped to about 20,000 feet.

Given the remarkable altitude of the balloon, the builders of the contraption had to take special precautions. After all, it is 40 degrees below zero at that height and 99 percent of the Earth's atmosphere is below.

"When it gets that high and that cold, there is a lot of energy in the box that keeps it pretty warm," said Rod Fritz

of the Amateur Radio Club.

The device landed about four hours after it launched in Buttonwillow, about 10 miles from where it was expected to land, Mr. Fritz said.

"It looks like it's in very good shape," he told the News-Press just a few minutes after the contraption was recovered.

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