

Students call space station with home-built radio

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TORONTO — Four Toronto college students have accomplished a technological feat that their teachers are calling a first.

The Humber College seniors made contact with the International Space Station Monday with a radio system they designed and built themselves.

School officials say that, to their knowledge, that's never been accomplished by students at the college level.

The project got off the ground about a year ago as the students looked for a way to apply knowledge gained from their radio communication courses.

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Students build radio, call space station

Four Toronto college students made contact with the International Space Station on Monday with a radio system they designed and built themselves.

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After an anxious few hours of waiting for their big moment — and a few last-second technical glitches — the team sent their signal into space at about 12:29 p.m. Monday.

The first message got no response, but after a crackle of static and a second attempt, the voice of astronaut Sandra Magnus filled the room, and the excited students peppered her with questions.

They had a 10-minute window to talk to Ms. Magnus, during which they asked some technical questions and passed on a few queries from contest winners at the school.

Operation First Contact is the graduating project for 34-year-olds Gino Cunti and Paul Je of Toronto, Patrick Neelin, 25, of Welland, Ont., and Kevin Luong, 21, of Mississauga, Ont.

“Excitement and relief, lots and lots of relief,” Mr. Neelin said when asked how he felt.

“I got maybe an hour of sleep last night going over everything in my head, reflecting on the progress we've made ... and basically how we were told we were crazy and we'd never be able to do this.”

One student asked how well the International Space Station is protected from debris, while another wanted to know how it feels to see Earth from space.

“Up here I've seen the world from a different viewpoint,” Ms. Magnus replied. “I see it as a whole system, I don't see it as a group of individual people or individual countries.

“We are one huge group of people and we're all in it together.”

While school contacts with the space station are routinely made through the Amateur Radio on the International Space Station program, many of those contacts are made using a traditional ham radio.

“It's an incredible feat of undertaking and technology, and I'd just like to say I'm really, really proud of this team,” said Humber instructor Mark Rector.

“They're playing way, way above their league today.”

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