

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

## Ontario students reach out and touch outer space

MICHAEL OLIVEIRA  
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TORONTO -- Some 18 months of hard work came down to just one chance for success yesterday as four college students tested an ambitious project that pretty much everyone in their school thought was impossible - making contact with the International Space Station.

Operation First Contact involved beaming a signal from their class-project radio to the outpost orbiting about 440 kilometres above Earth. The Humber College students had only a 10-minute window to make contact with the station, which travels through space at nearly 28,000 kilometres an hour.

"NA1SS this is VA3JUV Humber College checking in for scheduled contact, do you copy?" 34-year-old Gino Cunti inquired as a crowded room of faculty, students and reporters held their collective breath.

The room was filled with static, followed by silence.

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Then another attempt was made and the barely audible voice of astronaut Sandra Magnus emerged through the crackling static.

"Hello, I have you a little bit weak. Can you try again?" Dr. Magnus responded as the room burst into applause.

The team of Mr. Cunti and Paul Je, both 34, of Toronto, Patrick Neelin, 25, of Welland, Ont., and 21-year-old Kevin Luong of Mississauga pulled off what their teacher said had never been accomplished by students at the college level.

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

"We had to build this system to NASA specifications ... this isn't one of your parents' CB radios. It's a much more complex device than that," said teacher Mark Rector.

When they successfully got through to Dr. Magnus, they peppered her with questions.

They were able to squeeze in 18 questions in all, including what she would say about seeing Earth from space.

"Up here I've seen the world from a different viewpoint. I see it as a whole system, I don't see it as a group of individual people or individual countries," she said. "We are one huge group of people and we're all in it together."

The group will be honoured this fall by Canada's Telecommunications Hall of Fame for a "really cool" achievement, said Steve McFarlane of the Amateur Radio on the International Space Station program.

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher