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First GeoFORCE academy ends

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Forty southwest Texas ninth-graders participating in GeoFORCE summer academy officially closed their first year of the program with a July 27 ceremony at Southwest Texas Junior College in Uvalde.

The program was designed to encourage students to pursue careers in geology-related fields. Students were selected through an application process targeting high-achievers in math and science.

Representing Uvalde High School on the 12-day cross-country adventure were Rosy Arellano, Schaefer Edwards, Bryan Gonzalez, Nazarey Ortiz, Hilary Prado, Andrew Nunez, Michelle Rodriguez, Marissa Vara and Felipe Villanueva III.

Victoria Herndon of Camp Wood represented Nueces Canyon High School, and Katie Bales and Carlos De La Torre of Sabinal High School were also on the team.

GeoFORCE Texas is a collaborative initiative designed by The University of Texas at Austin's Jackson School of Geosciences and Southwest Texas Junior College to increase awareness of the geosciences and to motivate participants to maintain high grades through participation in experiences outside the classroom.

Shell Oil Company, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil Foundation, SBC Foundation, and Priority Oil and Gas Company provide corporate support for the program.

This year's academy included travel to Austin, Washington, D.C., and New Mexico. Students heard presentations by leading scientists on topics ranging from the Mars landing mission to volcanoes and tsunami research.

The group also took field trips to areas of geologic interest in the Austin area, Harper's Ferry and Great Falls National Park in Virginia, the monuments and Smithsonian museums in Washington, D.C., and Bandolier and Carlsbad caverns national parks in New Mexico.

During closing ceremonies, SWTJC Dean of Technology and Institutional Advancement Blaine Bennett recognized the group for their completion of this summer's academy.

"You represent some of the best and brightest science talent in our area, and I congratulate each and every one of you on a job well done," Bennett said.

"These kids are the greatest," added GeoFORCE Texas coordinator Julie Spink.

"They endured eating squashed sack lunches, a flat tire on the bus in the middle of west Texas, late nights and early mornings. They did it all with enthusiasm and continual interest in the science being presented each day. They are going to be outstanding scientists in the future."

Spink was assisted by UHS teacher Wanda Demboske, Leakey High School instructor Kathryn Dowlearn and Cotulla High School teacher Annette Peña. SWTJC students Mary Gabaldon, Jennifer Arreola, Michael

Cavazos, Michael Ponce, Martha Gomez and Mariana Miranda also assisted.

This year's GeoFORCE student participants will continue with the academy next summer in a program that will take place at the Grand Canyon. A new group of ninth-graders will be selected to follow an itinerary similar to this summer's agenda.