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Chemistry club from USU adds bang to science

By **Wendy Leonard**

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WEST JORDAN — Oohs and ahs came from crowds of students as members of Utah State University's Chemistry Club created 20-foot steam plumes, turned clear liquids a variety of colors and shattered an otherwise rubber racquetball — all by mixing chemicals.

Blowing things up was kept to a minimum, but students at Mountain Shadows Elementary were able to witness some impressive physical and chemical reactions, as well as learn how fish breathe in water and how sugar turns to energy.

"Every time you eat, your body performs chemical reactions to make energy," USU senior Rob Severinsen told the students just before his colleague set a gummi bear on fire.

"It's called the howling gummi bear and if you listen carefully, you can hear it," Severinsen said. The objective of taking simple science experiments into schools, he said, is to get kids excited about science and "show them that it can be fun."

"We try to look for programs that will be educational as well as interesting," said Mountain Shadows PTA board member Carrie Sanders.

Giving kids hands-on experience with science and chemistry allows them to see how working with it on a daily basis would be, she said.

"Kids can't stop talking about what they learned," she said.

USU typically conducts demonstrations closer to the Logan-based school and for the first time branched out for a larger presentation at Mountain Shadows. The idea is to complement what the kids are learning in their regular course work, which for fifth- and sixth-graders at Mountain Shadows, is states of matter and chemical reactions.

"We have a chance to show them that science is awesome," Severinsen said. "It gives them another reason for doing well in school." Seeing their "wide eyes," he said, "makes the whole day of doing the same science projects over and over, worth it."

The younger classes took home plastic bags filled with homemade slime — which Severinsen said is a non-toxic mixture of polyvinyl-alcohol and borax, a household cleaner. When combined, they become malleable and "slimy."

USU's Chemistry Club reiterated safety with each experiment, making sure that kids knew they could possibly cause unintended damages if they hadn't read and re-read the instructions and perhaps asked for permission.

"Any type of science needs to be safe," Severinsen said. "These are things they could possibly try at home but being safe and making sure things are safe should be number one."

After burning off a gummi bear sugar rush and cracking a rubber ball frozen with liquid nitrogen, Severinsen said students should realize that "science is not something only the elite can touch. Anyone with a little vinegar and baking soda can get involved in making chemical and physical changes in their environments."

E-mail: wleonard@desnews.com