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CORVALLIS Gazette-Times

Print Page

Thursday, December 21, 2006
Last modified Tuesday, December 19, 2006 10:58 PM PST

Community

Climber recovers OSU balloon

By Mary ann albright
gazette-times reporter

Last Thursday's windstorm may have inconvenienced the majority of Benton County, with some residents still left literally in the dark thanks to power outages, but the violent gusts actually made life easier for Philomath High School lumberjack Sam Bush.

Bush and other students in Simon Babcock's forestry class were called upon by Oregon State University's department of nuclear engineering and radiation health physics, along with Oregon Space Grant, to retrieve a weather balloon stuck in a tree between Dallas and Falls City.

Attached to the balloon were boxes containing atmospheric radiation detection equipment and other instruments designed by OSU professor and Oregon Space Grant director Jack Higginbotham's introduction to design class.

The balloon originally landed near the top of a 250-year-old, 150-foot-tall Douglas fir tree. Last week's storm, however, blew it into an 80-foot hemlock.

That made Bush's job easier when he scaled the tree Monday morning and retrieved the balloon.

"It wasn't too bad. Luckily it was a smaller tree, so I was only up about 40 feet. It was a good experience, to climb out in the woods," said Bush, 17, a senior.

Bush and Higginbotham go to the same church, so when Higginbotham and his OSU students and Oregon Space Grant recovery team realized their balloon was stuck out of reach, he asked Bush if the Philomath High forestry class might be able to help.

It took Bush a couple hours to climb the tree. As he ascended, he had to cut many of the lower branches. The canopy remains intact, and the tree was not harmed, he said.

"I can't say enough about the maturity and professionalism these young high school students displayed," said Higginbotham.

Other PHS students who participated in Monday's recovery efforts were juniors Beth Torgerson, Shantel Demaris, Jeff Yeager, Riley Stephenson, Andy Harvey, Justin Turner and Dallas Roles, and senior Chris Nelson. Also accompanying the group were Babcock, Higginbotham, Caleb Cornelius, an Oregon Space Grant technician and OSU sophomore majoring in information systems, and Kenneth Sernach, an OSU junior majoring in mathematics.

Higginbotham's class launched the weather balloon near Florence on Dec. 8. The balloon rose to almost 100,000 feet, then air pressure caused it to pop.

A parachute deployed, slowing the balloon's fall. OSU students and faculty advisers began chasing the balloon using global positioning satellite technology.

They located it within a mile that day, but had to return to pinpoint the location. That's when they discovered the balloon and the attached equipment in the fir tree.

Not only was the recovery effort a chance for his students to practice their climbing, sawing and navigational skills, but also it demonstrated a practical application of timber sports, Babcock said.

The balloon's atmospheric detection equipment was intact, so students in Higginbotham's class will be able to see if their instruments successfully measured things such as gamma rays, beta rays, temperature, altitude and barometric pressure.

For Bush and his classmates, Monday's adventure wasn't just an excused absence from school. It was a chance to use their skills as "jacks" and "jills" in a new way.

“It was fun to help out OSU and learn about what they were doing with the testing and the weather balloon,” Bush said.

Mary Ann Albright covers higher education. She can be reached at maryann.albright@lee.net or 758-9518.