Galactic Getaway: A Community-Based Rocket Exhibit Model for Inspiring the Next Generation of Space Explorers

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Abstract

Access to museum-quality science experiences is not evenly distributed; for many families, cost and distance place such experiences out of reach, and a child's exposure to the space industry often depends on the community they happen to live in. The Galactic Getaway program was founded to close that gap. The program brings free, museum-quality 1:144 scale metallic rocket model exhibits to public libraries, community fairs, colleges, and educational institutions across the San Francisco Bay Area, so that communities of every size and circumstance receive equal access to the launch vehicles shaping the next era of space exploration. Operated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded by a high school student, the program has placed exhibits at 17 venues across four counties and reached over 60,000 visitors in person. The program uses a rotating placement model, cycling each exhibit through different communities every four to six weeks to maximize reach. The collection includes both United States and international next-generation launch vehicles. A low-cost visitor feedback system built around a tablet kiosk and a linked spreadsheet records visitor responses, and a full set of promotional materials is deployed as part of visitor engagement. Librarian feedback indicates increases in space book circulation, patron engagement, and repeat hosting requests. The Aeronautics and Astronautics department at Stanford University hosts the full collection in the Durand Building, and the Club for the Future program at Blue Origin has recognized the program's alignment with its mission to inspire future science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) professionals. This paper describes how the program operates, where it has been deployed, the impact observed to date, and how other students could replicate the model in their own communities.

Keywords: *space exploration, informal science education, rocket models, aerospace outreach, community engagement, public libraries, STEM equity*

1. Introduction

Space exploration is entering a period of rapid growth. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is preparing to send astronauts around the Moon for the first time in decades through the Artemis II mission (NASA, 2024). Reusable launch systems have already cut the cost of reaching orbit dramatically, from roughly $54,500 per kilogram on the Space Shuttle to under $2,720 per kilogram on the Falcon 9, a reduction of about twenty times (Jones, 2018). A newer trend is the effort to move large-scale computing into orbit. According to reporting by CNBC, SpaceX has proposed a constellation of up to one million satellites intended to serve as a foundation for orbital artificial intelligence (AI) data centers (CNBC, 2026). Google has similarly disclosed Project Suncatcher, an early research effort exploring space-based AI infrastructure

built on radiation-hardened processors and high-bandwidth optical links (Introl, 2026). These efforts may just be the start, but the momentum behind them is unlikely to slow, and they point to a widening demand for people who understand rockets and space systems.

Despite this momentum, many young people remain largely unaware of it, and awareness is not spread evenly. A child in Pittsburg and a child in Palo Alto live roughly fifty miles apart, yet museum-quality science does not reach them equally. Space still exists mainly on a screen or in a textbook for a large share of families, and science museums often charge admission that is out of reach. Which community a child grows up in should not determine whether they ever stand close to the machines defining their generation's future. Closing that gap early, by placing authentic, engaging material where families of every background already gather, is the problem this program was built to address.

Galactic Getaway is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that brings museum-quality metallic rocket model exhibits into public libraries, community colleges, and local fairs at no cost to the host or the visitor. The central premise is one of equal opportunity: communities of every size and circumstance, from a university campus to a small-town library, should have the same chance to stand close to accurate, detailed replicas of the vehicles expected to carry humans to the Moon and Mars. When that happens, space becomes concrete rather than abstract, regardless of where the visitor happens to live. This paper describes the operating model, the lessons learned during its development, and a path by which other students could establish similar programs in their own communities.

2. Program Overview

Galactic Getaway operates on a rotating placement model. Each exhibit stays at a venue for about four to six weeks and then moves on. This replaced an earlier plan to donate exhibits permanently to individual libraries. A permanent donation would have fixed one set of models in a single location indefinitely, whereas the rotating approach lets the same set reach eight to ten communities in a year. That single change is the main reason the program became scalable.

2.1 The Rocket Collections

The program maintains two United States rocket sets and one international set. The United States collection includes Starship, Falcon Heavy, the Space Launch System, New Glenn, Vulcan Centaur, Neutron, and Relativity Space's Terran R. The international set includes Russia's Yenisei and Angara A5V, China's Long March 9, and Europe's Ariane 6. At present, all eleven models are displayed together in the glass wall cabinet of the Durand Building at the Stanford University Aeronautics and Astronautics department. This is the first known instance of these particular models being exhibited together. Alongside the physical models, the program displays comparison posters showing the technical specifications of paired vehicles, together with a six-rocket infographic that visitors frequently photograph (Figure 2).

Figure 1. *The eleven-rocket display in the Stanford University Aeronautics and Astronautics wall cabinet, featuring United States and international next-generation launch vehicles. A person views the exhibit through AI-powered smart glasses.*

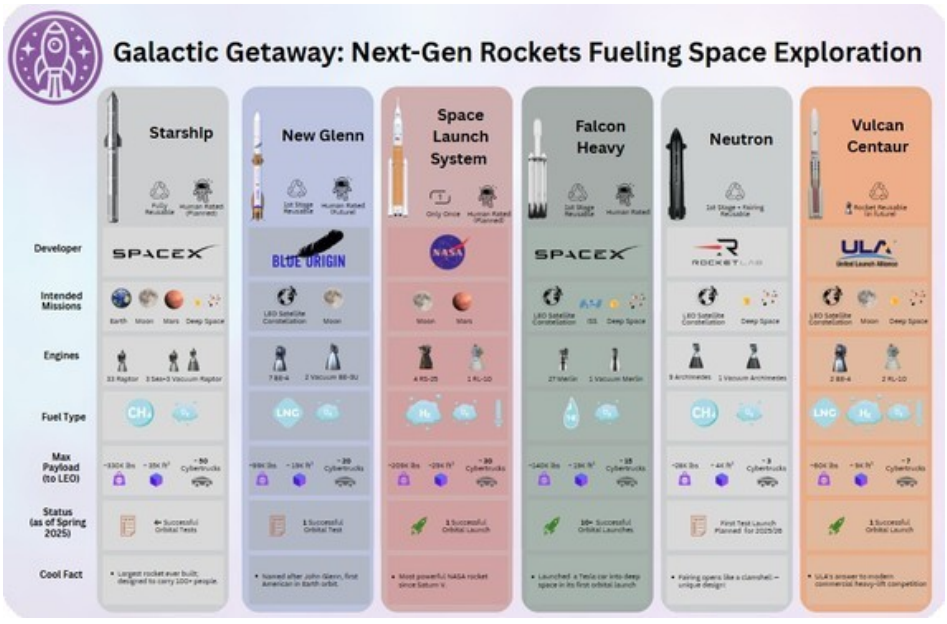

Figure 2. *The program's six-rocket infographic, comparing next-generation United States launch vehicles by developer, engines, fuel type, payload, and mission profile. The poster is displayed on an easel beside every exhibit and is one of the most photographed items at each installation.*

The models are produced by international fabricators, most of them based in Russia. A full set, including customs and shipping, costs about $4,000. Metallic, museum-quality models were chosen for a specific reason. Early on, visitors responded very differently to an object with real weight and texture than to a printed poster or a plastic toy. The metallic models tend to stop people the moment they walk into a room.

2.2 Installation Process

More than fifty libraries and community institutions across the Bay Area have been contacted, and most expressed genuine interest. A number could not host an exhibit, usually because they lacked a suitable display case, had scheduling conflicts, or were short on space. Where a venue already has a case, the models go in directly, mounted on customized base boards built as part of an Eagle Scout project. Where there is no case, a portable display box is provided. On installation day, the exhibit is transported by car and set up by a small team of two or three volunteers.

2.3 Venue Promotion and Visitor Engagement

Delivering the models to a venue is only part of the work; an exhibit that goes unnoticed has limited effect. Before an exhibit opens, advance announcement postcards are posted on campus bulletin boards and library community boards. At the display, an on-table poster with a QR code is placed beside the models, and an infographic comparing the six United States rockets is set on an easel next to the case. At venues with available screens, such as the Almaden Branch Library, customized video presentations loop on the display with specifications and facts about each rocket. Some libraries also create dedicated listings in their programming calendars. For the installation at Stanford's Durand Building, a full-size announcement poster featuring technical details and a rocket height comparison chart was designed specifically for the venue (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Exhibit announcement poster for the Stanford Aeronautics and Astronautics installation, featuring rocket height comparisons and information about an AI smart-glasses experience.*

Visitor feedback is collected through a simple but effective system. A tablet running kiosk software displays a custom feedback page hosted on the program website. Visitors select one of four ratings, and a second screen presents a world map on which they can request specific rockets they would like to see added. Each response is logged automatically to a linked spreadsheet with a timestamp and a pre-coded venue identifier, and the tablet resets to the home screen after every submission. The system costs very little to operate and has recorded numerous responses across venues (Figure 4).

Figure 4. *The tablet-based visitor feedback interface, built with a kiosk browser and a custom feedback page hosted on the program website.*

2.4 Workshops and Media

Hands-on workshops are offered at some venues. At the Dublin Library, approximately fifteen children built paper models of the Vulcan Centaur using templates provided by United Launch Alliance. A notable observation was how much the participants already knew; several could describe rocket stages and explain basic propulsion concepts, likely from online video content. The workshops appear to give structure to knowledge that many children have already absorbed informally. The program also produces a space-themed radio segment that has run for more than thirty episodes over two years, and a companion video channel with more than sixty space-related videos has surpassed 66,000 views, extending the program's reach well beyond the physical exhibits.

3. Community Engagement

Every venue begins with direct outreach. Library managers are contacted by email or in person, shown photographs from previous installations, and consulted on logistics. Table 1 lists a sample of the venues that have hosted the exhibit.

Table 1. *Sample exhibit venues (2025-2026).*

Venue	County	Period
Stanford Aeronautics and Astronautics, Durand Building	Santa Clara	2025-2026
Milpitas Library	Santa Clara	May 2025
San Lorenzo Library	Alameda	Jul 2025
Cupertino Library	Santa Clara	Jul 2025
Dublin Public Library	Alameda	Aug 2025
Clayton Community Library	Contra Costa	Sep 2025
Moraga Library	Contra Costa	Oct 2025
Pittsburg Public Library	Contra Costa	Nov 2025
Las Positas College	Alameda	2025-2026
Other additional venues (8 and counting)	Multiple	2025-2026

The range of venues is deliberate, and it reflects the program's central commitment: communities of every size and circumstance should get the same access to these next-generation rocket displays. The Stanford installation lends the program credibility and reaches a scientifically sophisticated audience, but the same models, the same posters, and the same care go to libraries such as San Lorenzo and Pittsburg, which serve families who rarely have the opportunity to visit a science museum. Cupertino draws families from the technology industry, Las Positas College serves college students, and the Moraga Pear and Wine Festival placed the exhibit in front of thousands of attendees who encountered it unexpectedly. A visitor in a small community library stands as close to Starship as a visitor in the Durand Building. Visitors in that last group, who did not arrive seeking STEM content, are frequently among the most enthusiastic.

3.1 Community Fairs as Force Multipliers

Community fairs have proven to be one of the most effective settings in the program. At every fair, attendees ranging from young children to adults in their seventies stop at the display. They notice the rockets through the glass, pull their companions closer, and start asking questions. Families who arrived with no particular interest in space often spend ten to fifteen minutes at the exhibit. Even teenagers who seem reluctant to engage at first often end up asking detailed questions, such as which propellant a Raptor engine burns. At several fairs, individual donors approached the exhibit out of curiosity and later offered support. The booth has consistently been among the more heavily visited stations at outdoor events (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *The Galactic Getaway booth at a Bay Area community fair, drawing visitors of all ages. Across fair deployments, attendees from young children to seniors stop to observe, ask questions, and inquire about volunteering.*

3.2 Stanford University Engagement

The connection with Stanford University began at the KIPAC Community Day in April 2025, an event that drew nearly 7,000 attendees (Stanford KIPAC, 2025). A doctoral student connected the program with the department's Student Services office, which led to the installation in the Durand Building. In a public post on a professional networking platform, Professor Juan Alonso of the Stanford Aeronautics and Astronautics department stated that the department was pleased to host the exhibit and that its mission aligned well with the department's goals in aerospace education (Figure 6). Recognition of this kind from an established aerospace department represents significant public recognition of the program's approach.

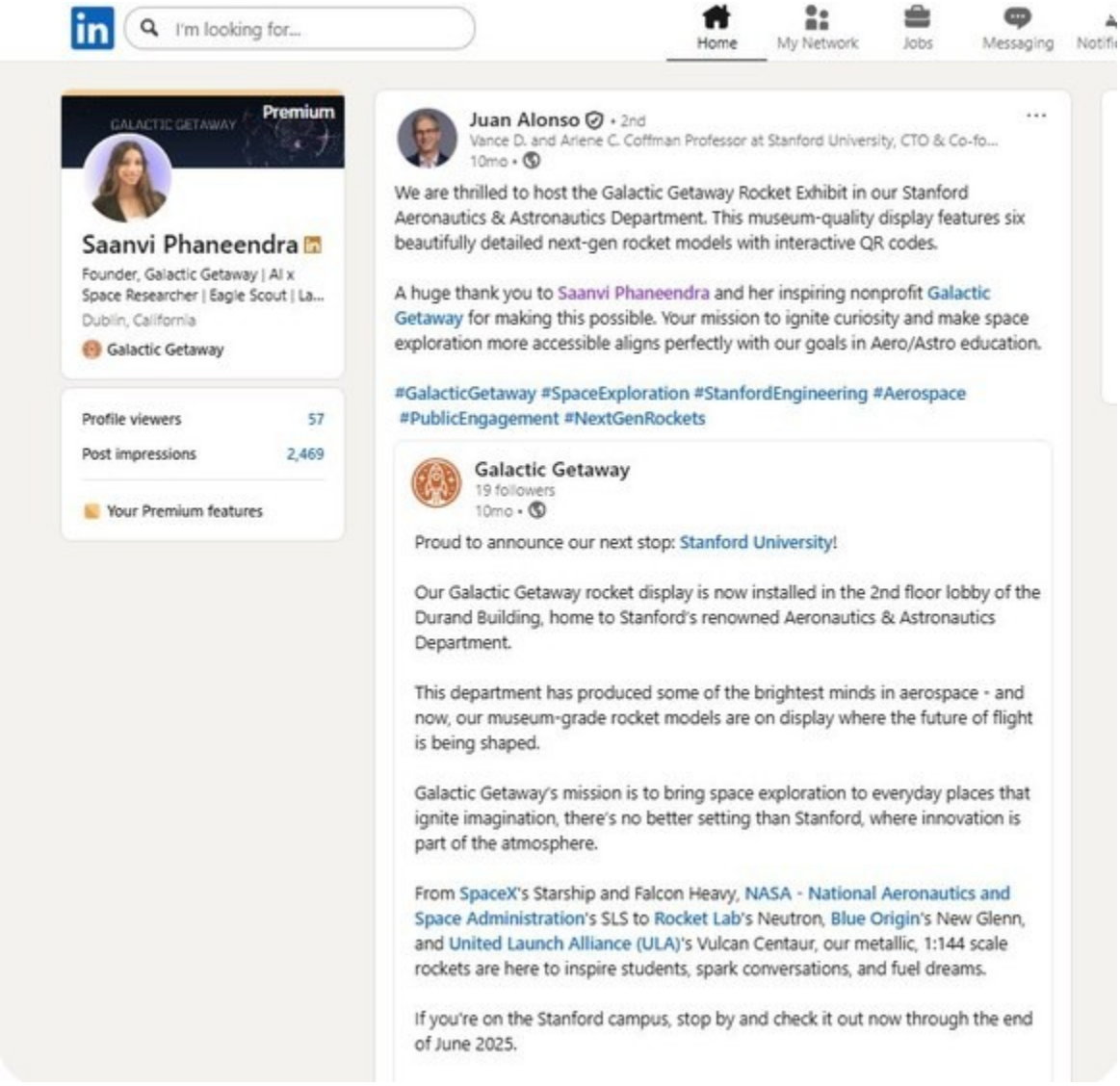

Figure 6. *Public recognition from Professor Juan Alonso of the Stanford Aeronautics and Astronautics department.*

3.3 Blue Origin Club for the Future

The Club for the Future program at Blue Origin sent a letter praising the inclusion of New Glenn in the exhibit. The program's stated mission is to inspire future generations to pursue STEM careers and to help build a future of human activity in space (Blue Origin, 2026), which closely parallels the goals of Galactic Getaway. When a child stands close to a metallic replica of New Glenn in a local library, that mission becomes tangible.

4. Observed Impact

Formal survey data are not yet available; a planned study using AI-powered smart glasses at the Stanford installation is intended to provide such data. The qualitative feedback from librarians has been consistently positive. As described in Section 2.3, numerous visitor ratings have been recorded across venues, with responses that are overwhelmingly favorable. Individual visitors who scanned the QR code at the display have also sent messages of appreciation and, in some cases, small donations.

4.1 Library Circulation

The clearest indicator came from the San Lorenzo Library. A librarian there had to restock the space book display twice during the exhibit's four-week placement because so many titles were checked out. Without the exhibit, she noted, those books might have stayed on the shelves. That is a direct, measurable transfer of curiosity from a physical display into sustained reading, an outcome that is uncommon for outreach programs of this kind.

4.2 Patron Engagement and Referrals

At the Almaden Branch in San Jose, a librarian reached out after a patron described the exhibit as highly impressive and asked where it would appear next. At the Dublin Library, a children's services librarian created recurring daily event listings for the full month and added the exhibit to the library's internal program slides. These actions were taken by the librarians on their own initiative, which suggests that the exhibit is genuinely useful to library staff and not merely a passive attraction.

4.3 Cross-Generational Response

One unanticipated outcome has been the program's pull across very different ages at once. Young children drag their parents toward the case. Grandparents describe watching the Apollo launches to their grandchildren. Parents ask about engineering programs. Some adult visitors have reported standing at the display for a long stretch simply because they had never seen anything like it. None of this was part of the original design, yet it has become one of the program's most consistent strengths (Figure 7).

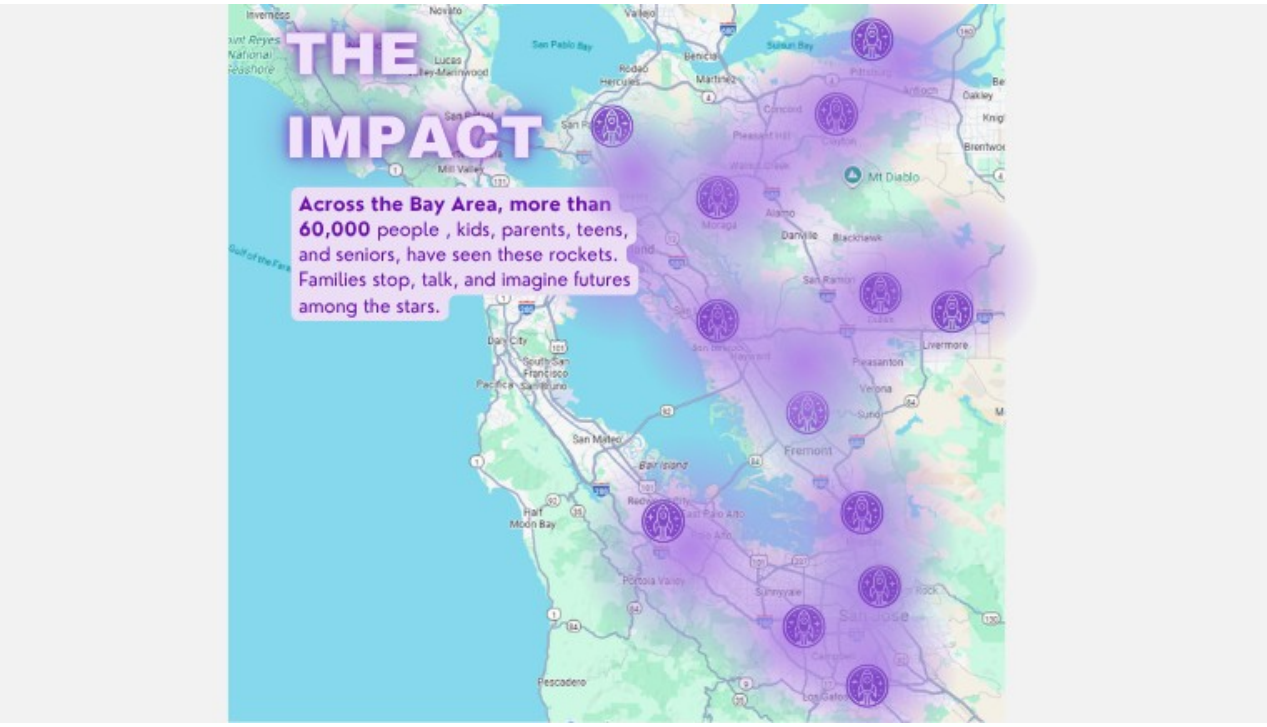

Figure 7. *Geographic impact map showing exhibit locations across the San Francisco Bay Area.*

4.4 AI-Powered Smart Glasses Study

In collaboration with a doctoral researcher at the Stanford Aeronautics and Astronautics department, the program conducted a study examining whether AI-powered smart glasses change how visitors engage with the exhibit, rather than only what they learn. The comparison poster already answers basic questions such as payload capacity and engine specifications, so the study focused on whether AI prompts visitors to ask deeper questions, for example moving from which engines a given rocket uses to why one agency selected solid rocket boosters while another avoided them. Visitor questions were classified using Bloom's Taxonomy as a framework for comparing question complexity. Data collection is complete, and the results are currently being cleaned and analyzed. Full findings will be reported in a subsequent publication.

5. Sustainability and Cost Structure

For the model to be viable, it must be operable by a small team with limited resources. Table 2 summarizes the approximate cost structure.

Table 2. *Approximate cost structure.*

Item	Cost	Frequency
Rocket set (6 models) plus customs and shipping	~$4,000	One-time per set
Display boxes and customized base boards	~$1,000	One-time
Placards and brochures	$100-300	Per venue
Transport and installation	$50-200	Per installation
Banners and promotional materials	$100-300	Per venue
Website hosting and management	~$300	Annual

Nonprofit discounts from several technology providers have helped reduce operating costs. Total funding raised to date exceeds $25,000, drawn from corporate matching, city grants, and direct fundraising. The program also holds Candid Gold Transparency 2025 status. The central insight is that the rocket models represent the largest upfront expense; after that, each additional installation costs only about $100-300. As a result, the cost per person reached improves as the number of venues grows.

6. Recognition

The program has received commendations from a member of the United States House of Representatives, a United States Senator, the Governor of California, the California Secretary of State, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, and the mayors of Dublin, Livermore, and Milpitas. The City of Dublin recognized Galactic Getaway as a finalist for Organization of the Year 2025, and its founder was a finalist for Young Citizen of the Year 2025. Local outlets, including the Lamorinda Weekly, Patch, and The Independent, have covered the program. Broader national coverage could meaningfully accelerate expansion into other regions.

7. Future Directions

7.1 National Replication by Student Volunteers

The highest priority for the program's next phase is to make the model replicable. At present, Galactic Getaway is operated by one founder and a small team of volunteers across the Bay Area, yet the underlying concept is straightforward. A student in another city could obtain a set of rocket models, build or source a display box, contact local libraries, and operate the same rotating placement model using the same promotional toolkit. The impact could scale nationally without requiring a central organization to manage it. What is needed is a documented and tested playbook that includes outreach email templates, installation checklists, promotional materials, talking points for librarians, the feedback kiosk configuration, and the cost breakdown. A preliminary version of this playbook already exists as a byproduct of the Bay Area work. Refining it for use by volunteers nationwide is the leading priority for 2026 and beyond, and it is the direction most likely to transform a regional effort into a national movement.

7.2 Institutional Expansion

Discussions are underway with the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California, Berkeley, and with the Chabot Space and Science Center in Oakland. Access to established science venues with large built-in audiences would represent a significant expansion beyond the library-based model.

7.3 Miniature Rocket Engines

Discussions are also underway to develop miniature rocket engine models as a future exhibit addition, contingent on additional funding and demand. While the rotating model works well at a regional scale, national expansion will likely require broader media coverage and a clear playbook that other students can adopt in their own cities.

8. Conclusion

Galactic Getaway began as a high school project with no external connections and no dedicated budget. The goal was simple: put rockets in front of people who would not otherwise encounter them. The program's experience since then suggests that presenting something authentic and visually compelling reliably draws a response. When a young child pulls a parent toward a case of rocket models and asks which vehicle travels to Mars, the effect is clear without a formal survey.

The space industry is entering a period of extraordinary growth. Reusable rockets, orbital AI data centers, and international competition are expected to shape the coming decades. Preparing a generation of young people for that future requires that all of them feel space is accessible, not only those who happen to live near a science museum or attend a well-resourced school. A child's curiosity should not be confined by their zip code. Galactic Getaway offers one approach to making that principle operational, and this paper is intended to give other students the components needed to build something similar.

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