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Mountain View High School students Ervin Fleming, 15, kneeling, left, and Arnikan Baleswaran, 17, launch a miniature marshmallow Saturday during the seventh annual MESA Day at Clark College. The event, which drew 150 students, sparks interest in math, engineering and science.

Engineering a new generation

Kids gather to show their scientific chops at Clark College

By **ERIK ROBINSON**
Columbian staff writer

With a flick of a spring-loaded plastic spoon, Mountain View High School students Arnikan Baleswaran and Ervin Fleming sent a marshmallow flying.

The projectile banged against

a classroom door and then came to rest in the hallway.

Mischiefous shenanigans are nothing new in area schools, but Fleming and Baleswaran weren't disciplined for deploying their makeshift catapult in a Clark College hallway on Saturday afternoon. Far from it.

In fact, students were encouraged to build catapults, drop eggs from a stairway and develop air-propelled rocket cars as part of the seventh annual

MESA Day at Clark College. A total of 150 middle and high school students gathered to demonstrate a hands-on grasp of physics.

"We're hoping to really get kids excited about science, technology, engineering and math," said Armetta Burney, director of the state- and grant-funded program in Southwest Washington.

MESA stands for Math, Engineering and Science Achieve-

ment.

The program targets underrepresented populations in science fields, especially African-Americans, Latinos, American Indians and women. It emphasizes adult role models, Burney said.

"A lot of our students may not know about the opportunities," Burney said.

Burney herself serves as a

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role model. An African-American who grew up in Portland, Burney earned advanced degrees before working as a telecommunications engineer in Wisconsin. She has worked as the MESA regional director in her current position at Washington State University Vancouver for the past two years.

She likes the fact that the nationwide program emphasizes real-world challenges.

Every three years, the national MESA committee sets students upon a specific problem. This year and last, the students have tackled wind energy — an especially relevant topic during a boom time in wind power development in the Pacific Northwest.

"The timing is perfect," Burney said.

Teams of students who gathered on Saturday demonstrated their wind turbines, displayed academic boards and gave oral presentations.

The winning high school and middle school teams advanced to the state competition in Seattle in May.

The winning middle school team included brothers Zach and Alex Ojstersek, Daniel Rehman and Cody Smith of Jason Lee Middle School in Vancouver. The high school winning entry was submitted by Arnikan Baleswaran, his brother Aranan, Brian Lu and Jonathan Wu of Mountain View in east Vancouver.

Competitors included students from Mountain View and Hudson's Bay high schools in Vancouver, along with middle school students in the Evergreen, Vancouver and Hockinson school districts. In Clark County, science and math teachers work with students in the program before and after normal school hours.

Mountain View students Arnikan Baleswaran, a junior, and Fleming, a sophomore, need no convincing.

Both are locked on to science-oriented careers.

Arnikan Baleswaran wants to study mechanical engineering at the University of Washington, followed by a career in aerospace.

"I really want to get into Boeing," he said.

Fleming hasn't zeroed in on a college, but he's interested in a career in medical engineering. He readily acknowledges that MESA offers an outlet for both his creative and destructive tendencies.

"My family will agree that I'm good at building stuff and breaking stuff," he said.

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Gaiser Middle School student Jordan Jacob, 12, drops an egg in a basket he designed with fellow student Tamara Emler, 14. The egg survived one drop. A second drop, from a higher point on the Clark College stairway, ended with a splat.