Hands-on lessons make College of Charleston trip memorable for Mitchell kids

Brenda Rindge

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Leroy Burnell/Staff

Mitchell Math and Science Elementary fourth-graders Deanjanique President (left) and Promise Drayton make electricity with a lemon.

The Mitchell Math and Science Elementary fourth-graders listened carefully while College of Charleston physics faculty members demonstrated energy using a light bulb and a solar panel to light a string of Christmas lights.

As the lights began to twinkle, 9-year-old Jacoby Johnson raised his hand.

“Is that a conductor?” he asked professor Sorinel Oprisan and his
wife, fellow professor Ana Oprisan, much to their delight.

“Yes, yes! Very good that you recognized that,” Ana Oprisan told the boy.

Before Thursday, Jacoby didn’t know what conductors were, he said. Now he understands how a conductor was used to convert light into mechanical energy.

It was part of a field trip for about 200 students from Mitchell’s third through sixth grades, who visited the college to learn about geology, physics, astronomy and biology through hands-on experiments led by professors.

The program gave them a chance to get out of the classroom and to perform basic chemistry and physics experiments, examine organisms under microscopes in biology labs, and tour the Natural History Museum and its newest exhibit, a family of pteranodons.

“It’s a good opportunity for the students,” said fourth-grade teacher Allison Rouse. “They not only get to do hands-on experiments, but they get to do them in a college setting.”

Students Deanjanique President, 9, and Promise Drayton, 10, agreed.

“It’s fun to go on field trips,” Deanjanique said. “We came here before and it was fun.”

The program started five years ago when Mitchell Math/Science Lead Teacher Ellen Mintz contacted biology professor Robert Dillon to arrange for her students to visit the college’s labs. She wanted her students to have a real and intimate connection with the scientific process by working in fully equipped, state-of-the-art laboratories with real scientists.

It has since grown to include the other departments and more elementary school students, Dillon said.
He recruited some of his fellow professors, and the program grew to include the four science disciplines. Chemistry was added last year and this year included lectures from the geology department and tours of the school’s Natural History Museum.

The outreach program is planned for the first week of the year because the college students are still on winter break, Dillon said.

It is co-sponsored by Charleston Chapter of Sigma Xi and Howard Hughes Medical Institute grant to the College of Charleston.

Reach Brenda Rindge at 937-5713 or www.facebook.com/brindge.