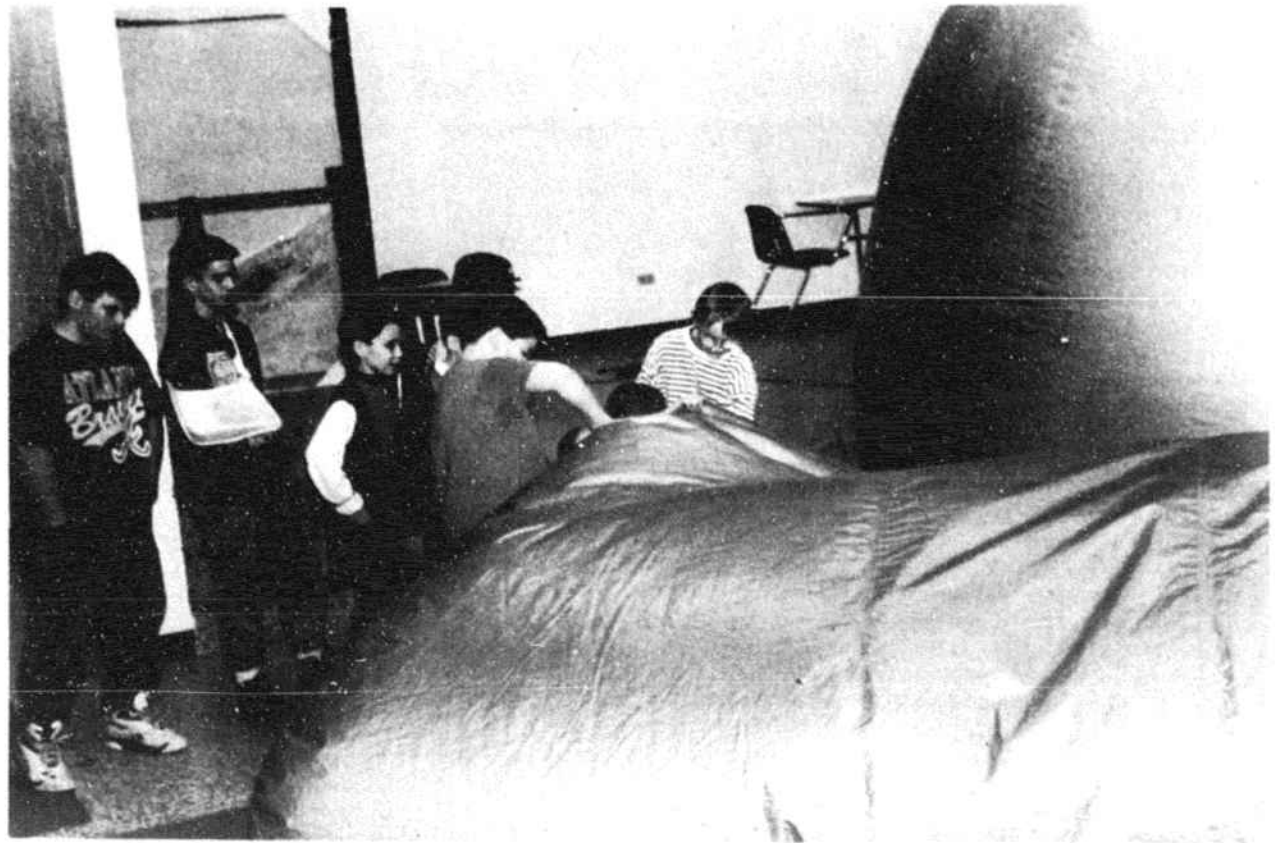




JOHN COVIL (front) and Jason Sofge emerge from the entrance tunnel into the dome.



STUDENTS WAIT THEIR TURN to enter the igloo-like portable planetarium dome.

Bringing The Universe To The Classroom

BY SUSAN USHER

Giggles bubble up as youngsters kneel outside a silver igloo and crawl in semidarkness through the short entrance tunnel. As the light inside the dome gradually changes, oohs and ahs escape as an outline map of the Earth appears all around.

Students quickly spot North America, the United States, North Carolina's Outer Banks, and then Cape Fear.

"Cool!" comes an appreciative whisper.

Answers come quickly until earth science teacher Darrell Cheers reaches a small spot on the map off the North Carolina coast.

"No, that's not Gilligan's Island, but it is an island. That is Bermuda," he replies to one student's guess.

Over the next 30 minutes Sheila Gore's seventh grade class eagerly examines the parts of a cell and checks the night sky, trying to locate various constellations and the more visible stars. Adjustments allow the operator to position the sky as it would be seen at a certain time on a particular night in a specific location.

The students are the last of more than 25 groups and approximately 700 students and adults to visit StarLab, a portable planetarium projector, during its brief stop at Shallotte Middle School.

With a \$13,000 price tag, the device is remarkable. Planetarium projector, viewing dome, six different projection drums and ventilation fan pack into several boxes and one large duffel bag.

The space-age StarLab takes only about 30 minutes to erect. Its silver dome of nylon-reinforced polymer fabric is extra tough to resist children's pushing and pulling and sharp pencils carelessly left in pockets. Two tunnels or tubes extend from the sides. One holds the box fan that provides ventilation; the other serves as entrance and exit.



EYES ARE RIVETED on the dome. From the left are Rodney Gause, Jason Sofge, John Covil and George Wagner, and in the foreground, Derrick Smith.

"I looked at it and said 'a class will never fit in there,' but they did," said Cheers, and comfortably.

The StarLab was provided courtesy of the N.C. Science and Math Alliance Southeast Partnership, based at UNC Wilmington. Here for six months only, it was hoppeditching from school to school through the multi-county area served by the partnership. After a last Brunswick County stop at Union Elementary, it was to move on to Columbus County.

"It could be such a valuable tool, but we only have it three days," said Cheers, frustration evident in his voice. Guidebooks with lesson plans, slides of satellite views as diverse as solar flares and the Mississippi River in Louisiana, and audio tapes ar-

rive the same day as the planetarium. That leaves little time to prepare for three days of classes.

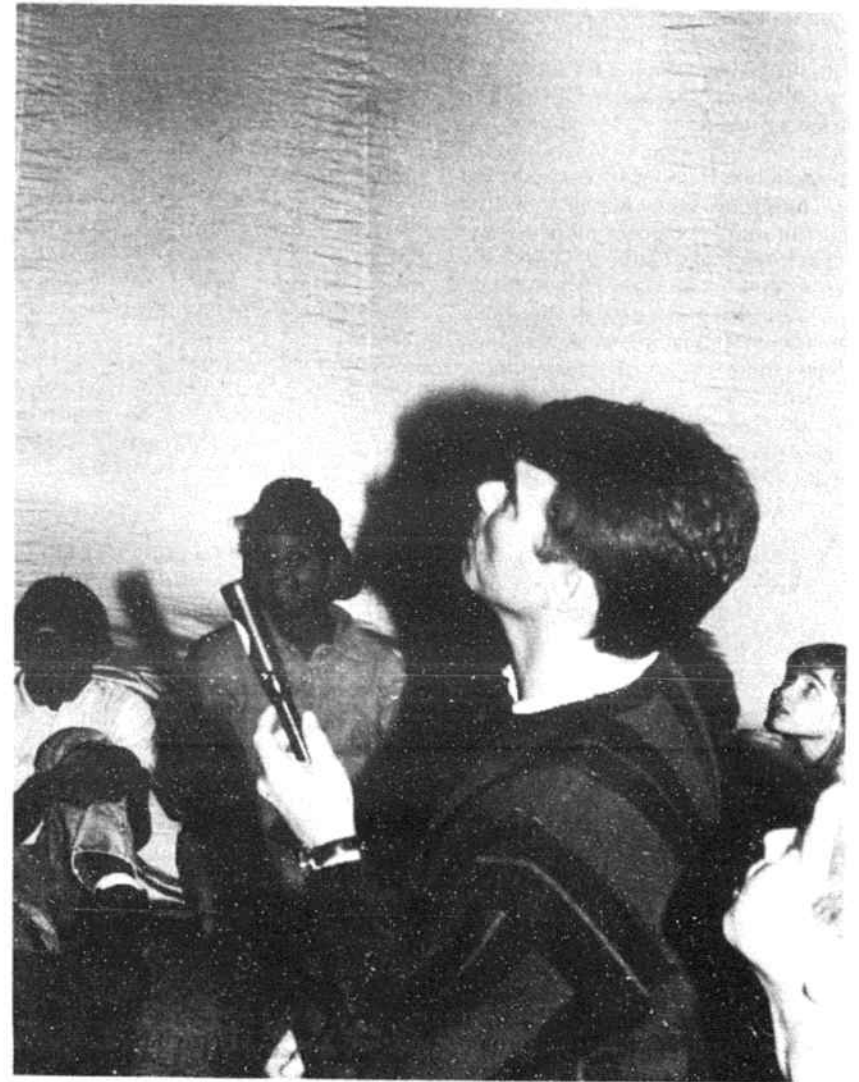
This was the first visit of the planetarium to Shallotte Middle, so the school chose to allow as many students as possible to experience the StarLab rather than limiting access to a few for more in-depth programs.

Gore's students enjoyed their visit.

"I loved the place," Kevin Harrison declared. "I liked seeing the stars and the cells."

"The pictures were exciting," added Crystal Knighton.

The best part for Brena Murray was when Cheers turned the projector quickly "and it felt like we were falling backward."



USING A POINTER BEAM, Darrell Cheers focuses students' attention on a constellation.

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