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Advocate staff photo by TRAVIS SPRADLING

Broadmoor Elementary School third-graders, from left, Adeja Stokes, 9, Tre'von Williams, 9, Roderick Gremillion, 9, and Vy Truong, 8, help Louisiana Art and Science Museum planetarium educator Sheree Westerhaus, far right, unveil new NASA images of the spiral galaxy Messier 101 on Friday at the museum. LASM was one of 76 museums nationwide chosen to display images taken by three NASA observatories.

Museum launches space exhibit

Third-graders get first chance to see NASA's new glimpse of cosmos

BY JEREMY HARPER
Advocate staff writer

A group of Broadmoor Elementary School third-graders helped unveil a new glimpse of the cosmos Friday at the Louisiana Art and Science Museum.

After their classmates counted down, four students pulled back black curtains to reveal two displays of new NASA images of the spiral galaxy Messier 101, which is 22 million light-years away.

The first display includes three photographic formats of the massive galaxy taken by different observatories: infrared from the Spitzer Space Telescope, visible light from the Hubble Space Telescope and X-ray from the Chandra X-ray Observatory.

"This is something they've never seen before so it's a whole new experience for them. To be the first to see it is what's really neat."

HOPE SCHILLING, teacher

The second display is a composite of the three images of the galaxy, which NASA says is made up of hundreds of billions of stars and is larger than our Milky Way galaxy.

The image is 95,000 light years across, which means a beam of light would travel 95,000 years to get from one

side of the visible galaxy to the other. The museum was one of 76 museums chosen by NASA to display the images as part of its celebration of the 400th anniversary of the first time astronomy pioneer Galileo turned his telescope to the sky.

"These newly released images illustrate the exciting discoveries that are being made by next-generation space telescopes, allowing us to view our universe in new dimensions," planetarium director Jon Elvert said.

The students, who cheered when the images were unveiled, had a similar attitude.

"It was awesome," said 9-year-old Chance Bonnette.

"This is something they've never seen before so it's a

whole new experience for them," teacher Hope Schilling said. "To be the first to see it is what's really neat."

The students' reward for their ceremonial assistance was "astronaut ice cream" — freeze-dried, pastel-colored space snacks that proved less popular with the students than the museum's space-themed exhibits. "It was kind of good," 10-year-old Gary Williams said of the ice cream.

Elvert said the museum decided to involve the students, who were already set to tour the museum Friday, to bolster its outreach to area youth.

"To have children involved in the unveiling is another special way to communicate NASA's discoveries to young children," he said.