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## **Moonstruck- UCF Students Enterprise to Boost Private Sector Race to Space**

By Jerry Jackson - 1/1/2011

Joseph Palaia (left) beamed signals from an Earthrise rover on a remote island near Greenland to student controllers in Orlando in 2009.

Entrepreneurs will roam in space some day, and a student-led group in central Florida is in the thick of the competition to send a remote- controlled rover to the moon as one of the first steps in the private sector's ambitious leap from Earth.

Earthrise Space, an Orlando non-profit launched by aerospace engineering students and advisers, may not win the race to the moon but it has achieved several milestones, including snagging a NASA contract that could be worth \$10 million.

NASA is trying to spur private industry participation in space exploration, and the agency has agreed to buy data from Earthrise and five other companies working on lunar robot projects. The contracts are worth at least \$10,000 each and as much as \$10 million. "This is huge for us. It gives us more credibility," says Ruben Nuñez, a senior engineering major at the University of Central Florida and a founder of Earthrise and its lunar rover project called Omega Envoy.

Debra Reinhart, assistant vice president for research in the Office of Research and Commercialization at UCF, says the lunar project has the support of the school's Florida Space Institute.

Earthrise and the other NASA contract winners are among dozens of companies, university consortiums and groups participating in a race-to-space competition called the Google Lunar X Prize. The \$20-million grand prize will go to the first competitor to land a robot on the moon, explore at least 500 meters and send video and images back to Earth.

"The moon is the end goal, but they don't have to get to the moon to succeed. They're getting turned on to space, and they're building real space hardware right now," says Joseph Palaia, an Earthrise board member and vice president of operations for 4 Frontiers Inc., a space technology and consulting company in New Port Richey.

Palaia helped test one of its rovers on a remote island near Greenland in 2009, beaming signals to student controllers in Orlando. The students from UCF and Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach are crafting a more advanced rover and keeping their eyes on the sky.

"We're aiming high," Nuñez says.

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