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WASHINGTON - The rainbow-hued, 38-foot van making its way across southeastern Missouri might be mistaken for an oversized ice cream truck.

But the only food it carries is freeze-dried. Inside, just above a glass case with astronaut Linda Goodwin's flight suit, packages of creamed spinach, macaroni and cheese and shrimp cocktail hang on the wall to be examined, not eaten.

The Southeast Explorer, part of Southeast Missouri State University's outreach program, is a museum on wheels. The Explorer's current exhibit, "NASA: Spirit of Discovery," is on the move until December, traveling to towns where few schools or families can afford trips to far-away museums. The walk-through truck holds 11 glass exhibits - as well as four computers, two televisions and satellite.

The van came about from a conversation Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, Mo., had with university president Ken Dobbins.

"I was complaining about the fact that so many of the kids in our little-bitty community never have an opportunity to go to museums," Emerson said. "The next thing I knew, we had the bus."

Emerson and Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., secured federal funds for the \$260,000 truck. The Explorer's first six-month exhibit featured Native American culture and began rolling in October 2004.

By June, the mobile museum had logged 7,000 miles - and visited more than 13,000 students in 77 schools, said Donna Rausch, museum outreach specialist.

Rausch has been there for every mile. Perhaps the only person in the world who can put "driver of a museum" on her resume, Rausch is on the road three nights a week. When she stops at a school, she guides the students through the exhibits.

The most rewarding aspect of running the mobile museum, she said, is watching how the children react. Many haven't seen a model of a spaceship or an astronaut suit up close before.

In particular, though, she said she enjoys watching the exhibit's effect on girls. From the introductory video hosted by Goodwin and Rausch's own influence as a female driver, archaeologist and museum guide, the girls come away "realizing they can do things," she said.

But there have been speed bumps along the way. On her first day driving the truck, Rausch said, she was pulling out of Sikeston Elementary School's circular driveway. Unused to the wide turns, she hit the awning. The school was undamaged - but the truck lost a corner.

Mishaps aside, the museum has rolled through 26 counties in Missouri and, most recently, to Washington, D.C., where Rausch drove to show the Explorer to congressional representatives and their staffs this month.

In the meantime, Emerson and Dobbins are brainstorming other wheeled projects. They want to start a mobile clinic, where southeastern Missourians will be able to receive checkups and screenings for everything from hypertension to diabetes.

Emerson and Sen. Jim Talent, R-Mo., earmarked \$650,000 for the project as part of the omnibus spending bill, passed in November of last year. It should be ready by early spring.