

Cochrane Cartoonist Heads to "Mars" for Spaceward Bound Crew 327

Dan Barnfield, host of upcoming kids' show BLAST OFF!, joins Mars Desert Research Station educator cohort October 12 to 16

[COCHRANE, ALTA.] - Cochrane-based sequential artist and educator Dan Barnfield leaves this week for Hanksville, Utah, where he'll join Crew 327 of the Mars Society's Spaceward Bound program at the Mars Desert Research Station (MDRS). Barnfield is one of a small number of educators from outside Utah invited into the October 12 to 16 cohort, and he's bringing a sketchbook with his flight suit.

Barnfield is the host and creator of *BLAST OFF!*, a Canadian kids' cartooning show funded through TELUS STORYHIVE and premiering on TELUS Optik TV and Stream+ in Fall 2027. The show follows Dan and his crew on an asteroid colony called Bunkhouse, where each episode sends kids into their own community to gather ideas, then back to a space station studio to redesign what they find as characters, creatures, and buildings for a colony called New Cochrane. The Mars analog at MDRS gives him a real-world sibling to the fictional asteroid colony.

"The whole premise of *BLAST OFF!* is that kids can look at their own backyard and see the raw material for a life in space," said Barnfield. "Spaceward Bound is the grown-up version of that same instinct. Teachers live inside the constraints for a week, then bring the lessons home to their classrooms. I get to do the same thing with a pencil in my hand."

The Spaceward Bound program is built around three objectives: science, simulation, and education. Crew 327's activities will center on analyzing Earth, and MDRS specifically, as a Mars analog, with a focus on local geology and geologic processes. Side quests fold in biosignatures work tied to NASA's search for life on Mars, and stretches of the week are run under full simulation of astronaut life on the Martian surface.

Barnfield's contribution to the crew is to pair short art-integration lessons with each of those blocks wherever they fit. Field geology on EVA could become on-site sketching. The engineering bay could become character design. The greenhouse could turn into speculative botany, the observatory into celestial creature study, and evening debriefs into comics journaling. Every lesson is built to be replicated in a K-12 classroom the following week without specialized equipment.

Barnfield will document the week for *BLAST OFF!* (blastoffstation.ca), and footage, sketches, and photography from the cohort will be folded into Season One episodes, teacher kits, and social channels. The Mars Desert Research Station sits outside Hanksville, Utah, and simulates an early Mars research base. The campus includes a habitat, engineering bay, greenhouse, science laboratory, and two observatories, with pressure suits and rovers used to work in the surrounding desert, a recognized geologic Mars analog. Program details at marsociety.org.

About Dan Barnfield

Dan Barnfield is a sequential artist, cartoonist, and educator based in Cochrane, Alberta. He runs Barnfield Studios, the umbrella for his creative work. He holds an M.Des in Comics and Graphic Novels from the University of Dundee and has published with DC Thomson's Commando Magazine.

About *BLAST OFF!*

BLAST OFF! is a Canadian kids' cartooning show for grades 3 to 6 and the families and teachers around them. Funded through TELUS STORYHIVE Digital Series, the show premieres on TELUS Optik TV in Fall 2027. Site: blastoffstation.ca.

About *TELUS STORYHIVE*

Since 2013, TELUS STORYHIVE has been able to support a community of thousands of local content creators across B.C. and Alberta, providing over \$74.8 million in production funding and creating a safe space for storytellers to hone their skills and bring the projects they care about to life. For more information, visit <https://www.storyhive.com/>.

Media contact and follow-up interviews

Dan returns to Cochrane on October 17 and is available for follow-up interviews starting October 19, in person in Calgary or Cochrane, or remote by video. Photography, sketches, and short video segments from the week will be available for media use.

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Mars Desert Research Station, (photo courtesy of Jen Carver Hunter)

[MDRS.jpg](#) Link



Mars Desert Research Station Past Cohort (photo courtesy of Jen Carver Hunter)

[MDRS_Crew.jpg](#) Link