



Contributed Photo by Amy Huang

Twin brothers Erik, left, and Andrew Boettcher made the transition from St. Joseph to Pasadena, Calif., by working for NASA in its jet propulsion lab.

## Twin brothers make a name through NASA

Former St. Joseph High School students make transition to Pasadena

By **TONY WITKOWSKI**  
HP Staff Writer

As twins, Andrew and Erik Boettcher have done a lot of things together.

The two learned basic HTML for fun by stealing their older sister's computer in their adolescence. Both Boettcher brothers graduated from St. Joseph High School in 2006 and attended in-state universities. Then there is the other thing they have in common.

Andrew and Erik both work in Pasadena, Calif., for NASA in its jet propulsion lab.

Erik, who has been with NASA longer than Andrew, works on outreach regionalization products to explore the solar system using the data scientists have gathered about Earth.

"The short answer is I make video games," Erik said. "We've been working on projects that aren't released yet. They call me a scientific software engineer, but I'm technically a contractor in the lab."

Erik's journey to NASA came after he transferred from Lake Michigan College to Western Michigan University.

He freely admits he wasn't the best student when it came to his grades at SJHS, but Erik became more studious upon enrolling at LMC.

Erik wasn't sure what he wanted to do after high school. After taking a few classes, he decided to study electrical engineering at WMU, which gave him a plethora of career options.

It was there a professor encouraged Erik to apply for an internship with NASA. He worked for 13 weeks in California as an intern in 2011 before coming back to finish his degree. Upon his return, NASA gave Erik an offer and brought him back in its early career hire program.

When Erik was younger, he recalled wanting to be an astronaut. But he didn't realize the jet propulsion lab was what took those pictures of Jupiter and Saturn that inspired him as a child.

"I had no idea that I would be able to get in," Erik said of NASA. "As an adult it is the concepts and the ideas that inspire me. The irony is I now make the images that inspire others.

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**ANDREW BOETTCHER**  
NASA

It's come full circle.”

### Two worlds collide

A few years ago when Erik was busy on a project with coworkers, he consulted Andrew on a problem they had come across in their data.

Andrew was still a graduate student at Michigan Tech, but after helping solve the problem, NASA brought him out for an internship – similar to what Erik did.

Like Erik, Andrew finished his internship and returned home to earn his degree. As a result of his previous work, another supervisor at the lab hired him and the twins began working on the same floor, in the same building, about 2,085 miles from St. Joseph.

"My bosses thought Erik worked out well, so his twin should do well, too," Andrew said.

Andrew is a software engineer whose main responsibility is to solve any problems that come with the

collected data. He runs through hundreds of gigabytes a day, writing code.

One of his favorite projects included animating the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter.

"When I was in high school, I spent a lot of time experimenting in programming," Andrew said. "I didn't think I would do this, but it's special to work here. Everyone is excited to come to work, everyone wants to be here."

### A tough transition

The brothers' mother, Lori, was blown away when she found out both her sons would work for a company that specializes in space.

"How many young kids out of college get to do that," she said. "When people hear both my sons work at NASA, they say, 'so, you really do have rocket scientists for sons.'"

The two occasionally fought in high school, like most siblings do. Lori said

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they would reconcile and then fight again over something else.

Erik is older by 30 minutes – or 1,800 seconds, as he likes to put it – so working with one's brother has its disadvantages. Andrew said it can be frustrating working with one another because they know each other so well.

“Erik is a really good person to work with, but working with my brother has definitely given me a better understanding of how to be patient with other people,” Andrew said.

Despite the familial aspect at work, the brothers said it was a rough transition as they didn't know many people in California. One of the hardest things to comprehend for both brothers was the cost of living adjustment.

While the pay scale is higher in California, the price of food and housing is too.

“In college, my roommates and I had a 4-bedroom house for \$800 a month,” Erik recalled. “Now I pay \$1,300 a month for a single-bed apartment. I mean, even the bread and milk cost more.”

Michiganers at heart, Andrew and Erik said they miss the people and the natural change from summer to autumn.

“I miss a lot of things. The best part of Michigan is Lake Michigan,” Andrew said. “It's better than the Pacific Ocean. One of the biggest changes was moving from a smaller town to the LA area.”

Because of their hectic schedules and the distance, Lori gets to see her 27-year-old sons only a handful of times each year.

But with the addition of their older sister, who became a web designer in New York, the Boettchers have a talented crew of children they take pride in.

“We're really proud parents and we are happy they are ours,” she said. “Words can't describe how proud we are of them.”

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