INFOCUS

ROCKET MAN

Indianapolis man aims to inspire the next generation of rocket scientists through youth boot camp

Christine Tannous Indianapolis Star | USA TODAY NETWORK

Sitting in his apartment in downtown Indianapolis, Tanaka Chonyera is surrounded by high-power rockets. Boxes around him housing different rocket parts and tools to required assemble them. A whiteboard behind him lists details for upcoming rocket build days.

On an average day, you can find Chonyera here – assembling rockets and running tests on how to build them more efficiently.

"I've always wanted to live a really exciting life," Chonyera said.

Chonyera, born in Zimbabwe and grew up in Botswana, has always been interested in science. In high school, he built his first high-power rocket from scratch for a competition through the STEM club. His club won the competition with his rocket.

"I was running amok all over campus," Chonyera said. "Anytime there was smoke going off, they were like, 'Oh, that's probably Tanaka.'"

In 2019, Chonyera won an essay contest on satellites against entries from around the African continent. Part of the prize was a trip to watch a rocket launch in French Guiana.

Chonyera describes winning the essay contest as a formative experience for him.

"It was a really big thing to beat the entire continent," Chonyera said. "That gave me confidence that I previously did not have in my own abilities going forward."

After attending Michigan State, he moved to Indianapolis to work as a project manager for Eli Lilly. Continuing to pursue his love of rocketry, he joined the Minority Engineering Program of Indianapolis, where he launched a free rocket boot camp for kids in 2025.

His High-Power Rocket Bootcamp program funds the entire process of building a rocket for participants, from the assembly to the launch. Any child over 8 is eligible to participate. Over 350 kids have gone through the program, with over 330 high-power rockets built as of October 2026. The program has received funding through a variety of organizations, including the Minority Engineering Program of Indianapolis, Eli Lilly and Cummins.

"I know what rocketry has done for me in my life, and I think it's something that is super inspirational to pursue," Chonyera said. "It really opens their mind."

Chonyera believes his passion for rocketry comes from a desire to challenge himself.

"I want to prove to myself that I'm capable of great things," Chonyera said.

Chonyera's goal is to break the record for launching the most high-power rockets per-capita in the world next year. To get involved with his boot camp, either as a participant or volunteer, you can reach out to him through his website or on social media.



Tanaka Chonyera teaches a group of students how to build a high-power rocket at Enlace Academy in Indianapolis on May 7. Chonyera hosts these classes through his High-Power Rocket Bootcamp. Students learn how to assemble the rockets, made from fiberglass, before they are launched at a later date. Chonyera's program funds the entire process, so it is free to all participants.



▲ Tanaka Chonyera prepares to teach a class the process of building high-power rockets May 7 at Enlace Academy in Indianapolis. Chonyera hosts these classes through his High-Power Rocket Bootcamp. Students learn how to assemble the rockets, made from fiberglass, before they are launched at a later date.
PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE TANNOUS/INDYSTAR



▼ Micah Schwantes-An, 12, looks up at a high-power rocket as it launches Aug. 9 at the Rocketeers of Central Indiana launch site in Muncie.



▶ High-power rockets sit against a fence waiting to be launched at the Rocketeers of Central Indiana launch site in Muncie on Aug. 9. The rockets were launched as a part of Tanaka Chonyera's High-Power Rocket Bootcamp.

◀ Tanaka Chonyera builds a high-power rocket in his apartment as he times himself to work on making the process more efficient at his apartment in downtown Indianapolis June 6. Chonyera runs a High-Power Rocket Bootcamp, a program that allows students to build and launch their own rockets for free.

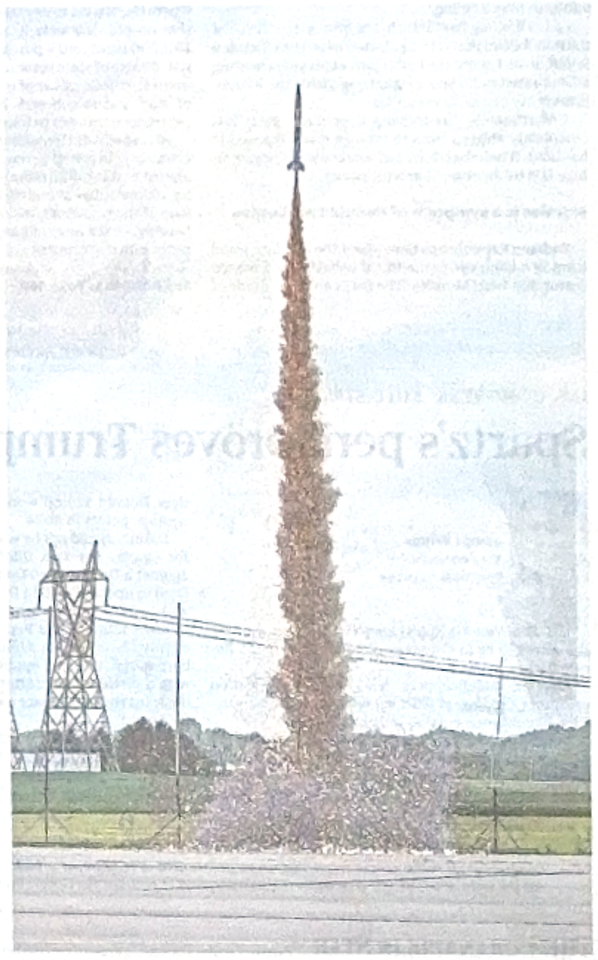
▶ Students Kerryson Cypre, left, and Jeune Charles, right, spray paint a high-power rocket May 7 at Enlace Academy in Indianapolis. The students participated in the class, taught by Tanaka Chonyera, that walked them through the steps on building a rocket. Classes like this are possible through Chonyera's High-Power Rocket Bootcamp, which is free to all participants.







◀ Tanaka Chonyera prepares a high-power rocket for launch at the Rocketeers of Central Indiana launch site in Muncie on Aug. 9. Participants of his High-Power Rocket Bootcamp watched the rockets they assembled launch.



A high-power rocket shoots into the sky at the Rocketeers of Central Indiana launch site in Muncie on Aug. 9. The rocket was launched as a part of Tanaka Chonyera's High-Power Rocket Bootcamp.

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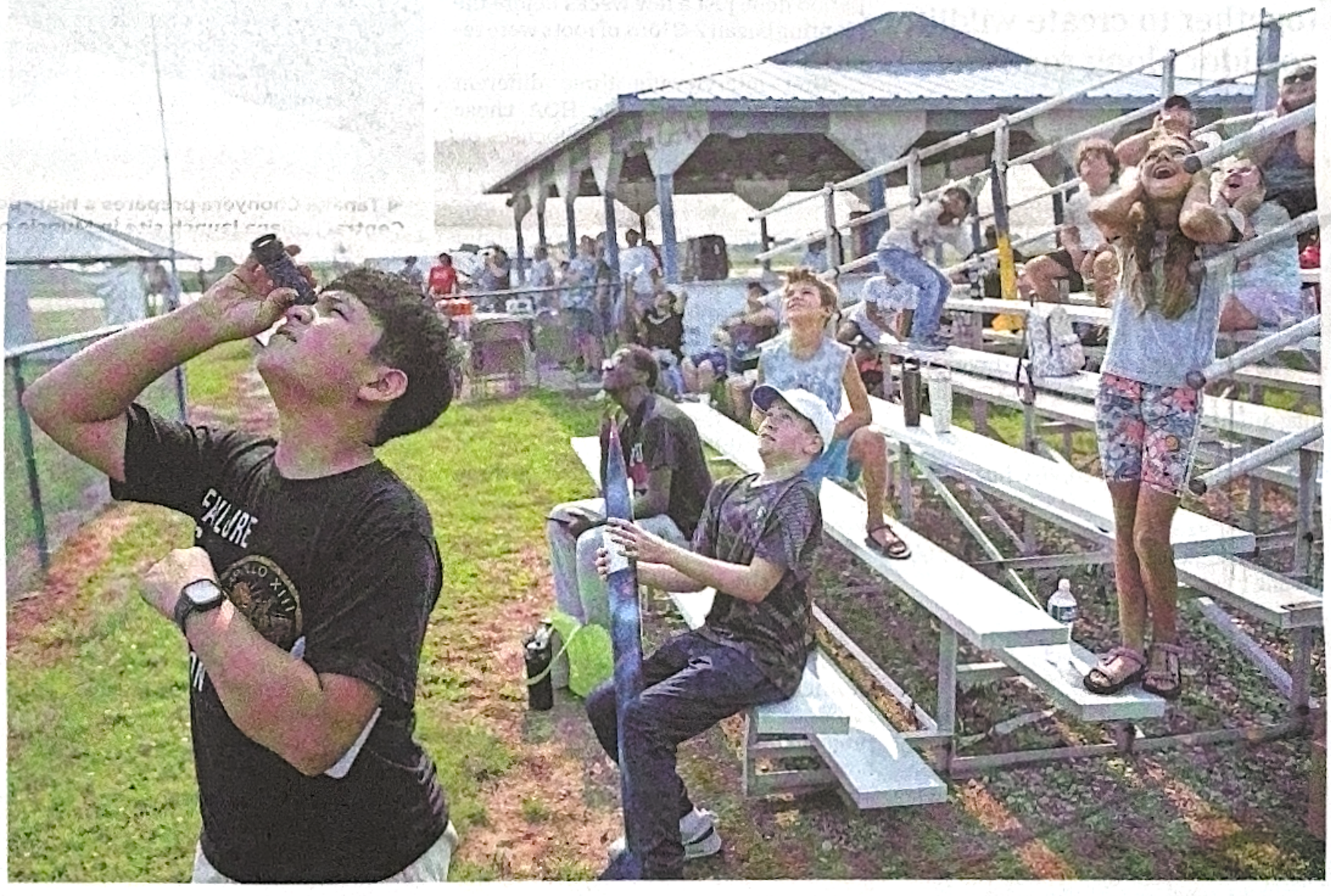
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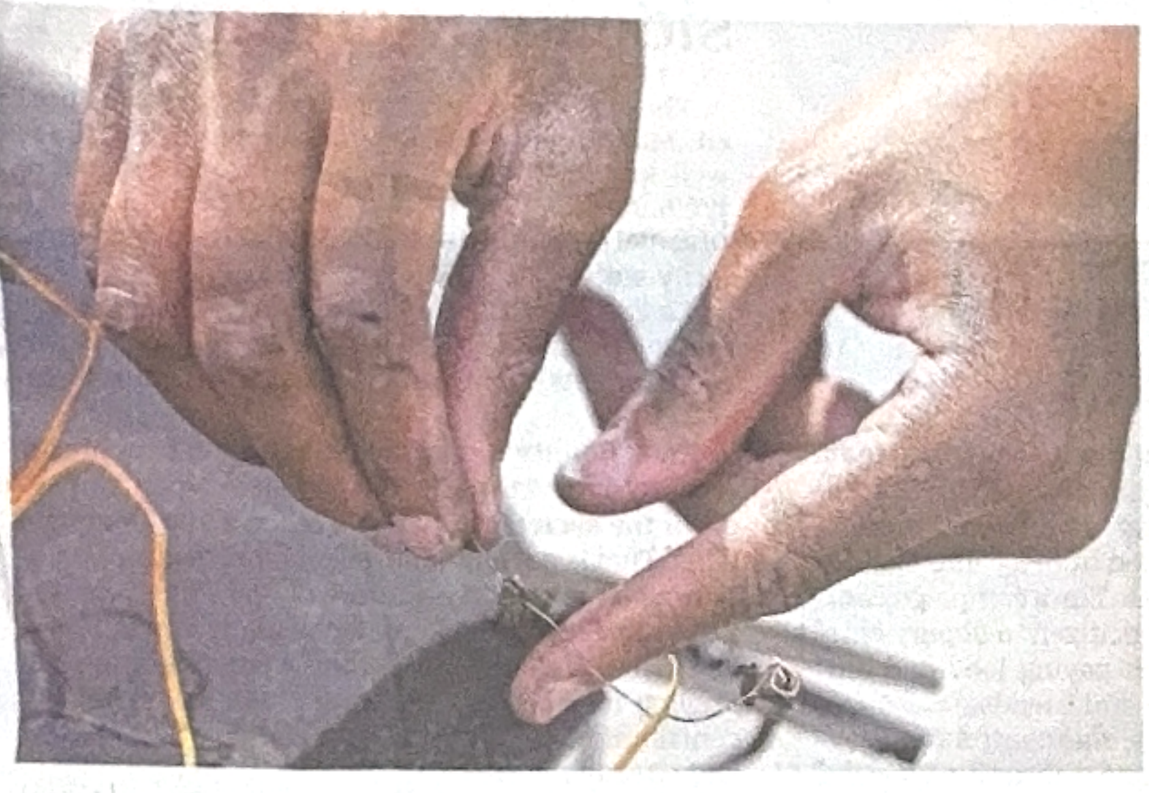
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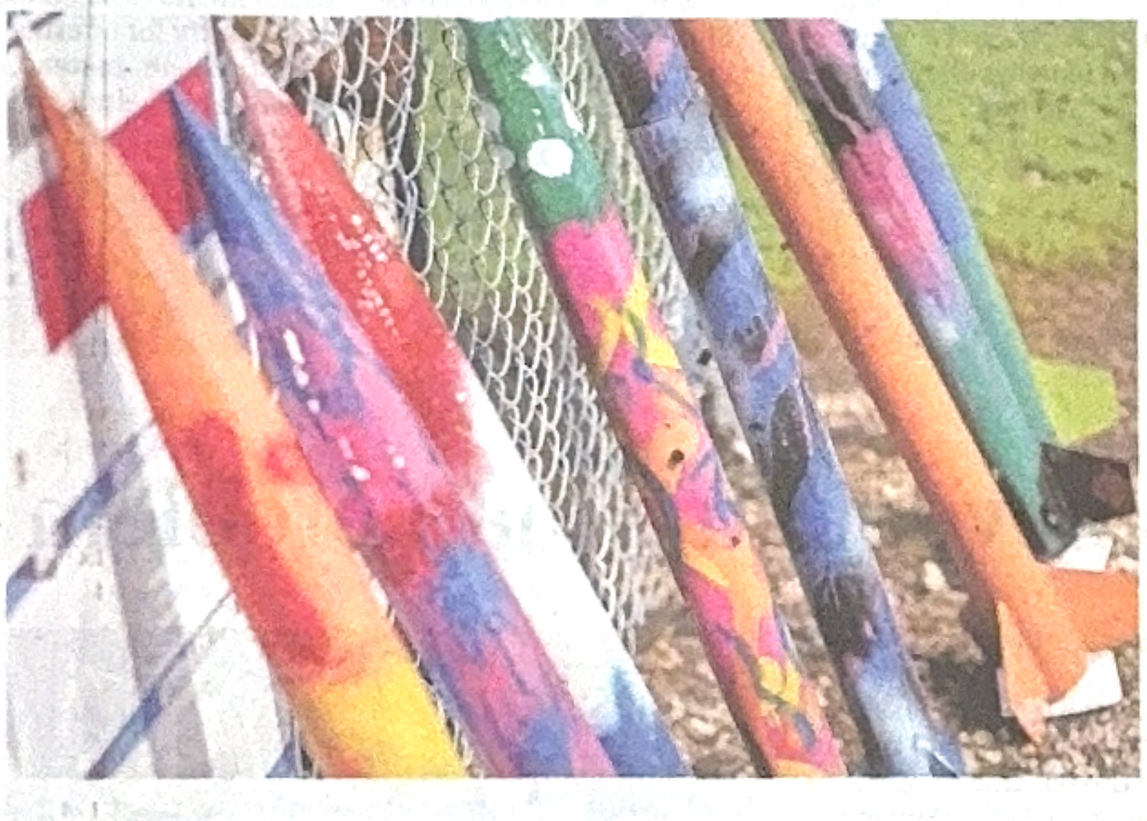
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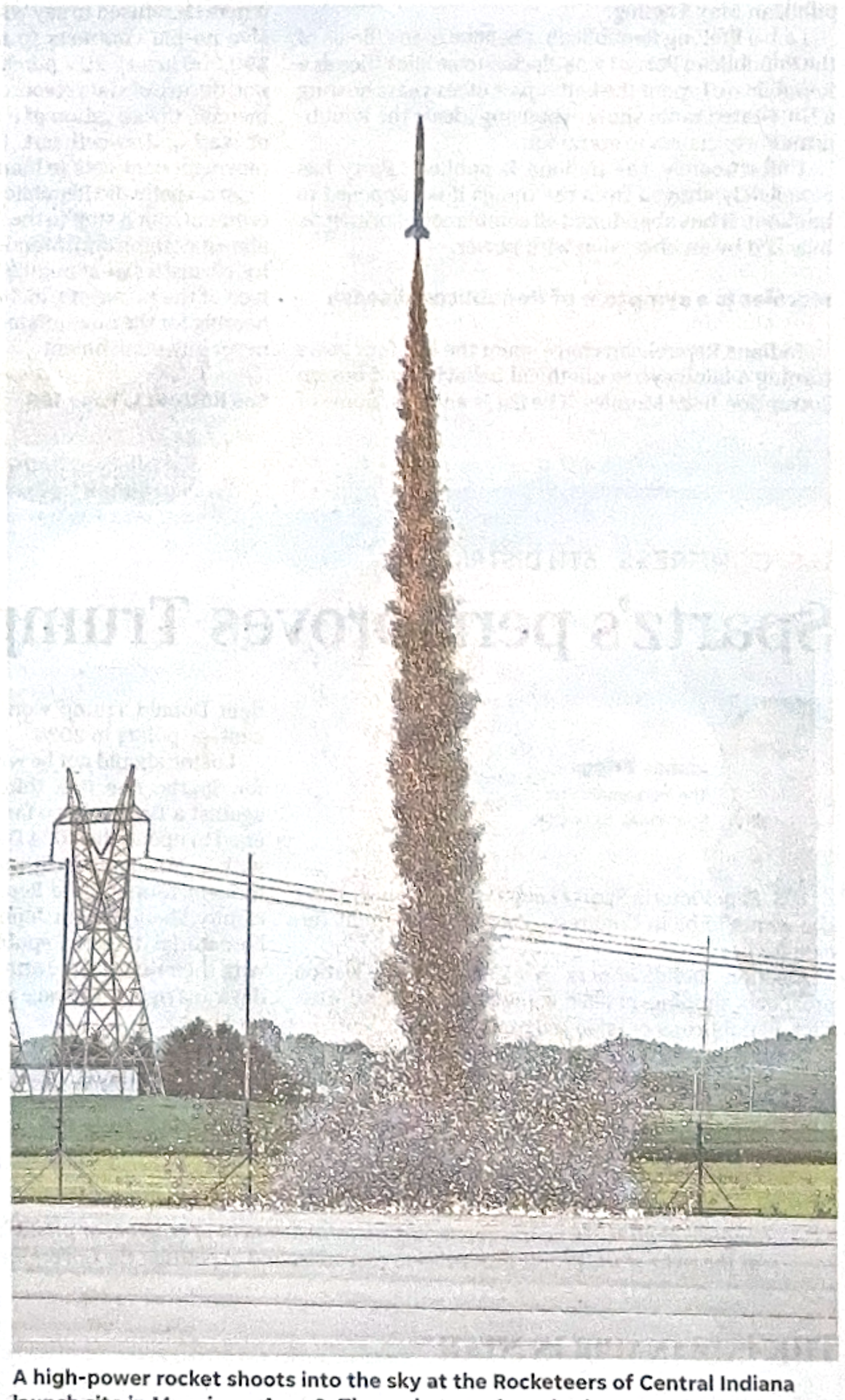
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