

# OSU/NASA Education Projects: Aerospace Education Services Program (AESP) Archive

Oklahoma State University-Stillwater, Oklahoma

## Personal Reflection by James Gerard. Written in October 1999.

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I recently had the privilege of participating in the Florida Council of Teachers of Mathematics in Miami, Florida. The key note speaker was astronaut Mike Mullane, three time space traveler and author. His multimedia speech revolved around the theme of making dreams come true. As I listened to his biographical musings, I realized that I was also living adream come true.

Sure, I'd love to have the opportunity to travel to earth orbit or beyond. My adventure in NASA's KC 135 Weightless Training Aircraft has given me a tantalizing glimpse of what such an experience would be like. It's like being able to smell the chocolate but never getting a piece of the cake. But this is my point. I have felt what weightlessness is like. And that is a dream come true.

I first became aware of the space program through the April 1964 National Geographic magazine which highlighted NASA's upcoming plans to launch men to the moon. I was hooked! And when I found out that Project Mercury had already been completed (I have no memory of anything to do with Mercury. Not Shepard. Not Glenn.) I remember chastising my parents for not introducing me to it sooner. From then on, every launch, mission and landing were viewed on TV, chronicled in scrapbooks, and reenacted with models. And I dreamed of riding into space.

High school brought me new challenges and new frustrations. I had trouble socially adapting after our move from Atlanta, Georgia to the Chicago, Illinois suburb of Cary. It was a magnificent choir teacher that brought me onto the stage and gave me a creative outflow that made school worth going to. By my senior year, I knew I wanted to be a teacher, a choir teacher, so I could do for other what had been done for me.

After graduation from Trinity College with a BA in Music Education K-12, I found that education positions like I was looking for were almost totally nonexistent. Budget cuts at some school districts had flooded the field with music and art teachers. In order to compete, I decided to continue my education to acquire certification for science, as I constantly heard of a need for those teachers. After a move to Cleveland, Tennessee and completing my certification, I was offered my first teaching job at Bradley Junior High School teaching 7th grade Earth Science and one Choir class. I was told by the Assistant Principal that I was one of two in the state certified for both Music and Science. So what appeared to have been a dead end was in fact the key element in my being hired. I knew that it would take everything I had learned in both my music and science courses to make a good teacher.

I loved being a teacher, and enjoyed the grade level I taught. Since I was always prompting my students to plan ahead and set goals, I knew I should do the same. My 10 year goal was to be an educator at a science museum or planetarium. To help with this goal, my grandmother offered financial backing for me to obtain my Masters Degree. I attended classes at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga for the next three years, graduating in the summer of 1987. My grandmother was

very proud and, as a graduation gift, let me use some of the remaining finances to attend Adult Space Academy at the US Space And Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

My session was set for September, 1997. I began to feel a little intimidated as my 'class' began to introduce ourselves. Many of them were wealthy, successful businessmen with a couple of MD's thrown in. When it was my turn, I sheepishly said that I was a teacher of Eighth Grade Earth Science. My sheepishness left as I heard, "Wow, you get to teach this all time!", "Does that sound like fun!", and "We need more teachers like you." I believe it was the first time I was treated and really felt like a professional. I determined from that experience that I would never feel second-rate again. I was a teacher. I was respected. If I was treated as a professional, I would still act as one and command respect rather than demand respect.

The following March found my family, now including three month old Jake, on a trip to Washington D.C. to visit relatives. Most important was my grandmother, both to say thank you for the wonderful gift she made to me and to introduce her to my new son. Sightseeing was also an important part of the trip, and was expressly interested in visiting the National Air and Space Museum on the Mall. So much, in fact, I informed my wife I would travel there alone, to take my time, video for my students, and fully enjoy the experience (my wife and kids went to the zoo that day and accompanied me the next day to visit the monuments, museums, and memorials). Upon my uncle's advice, I parked in the suburbs and rode the Metro to the downtown area. I soon discovered that walking from the Metro station would take me right past NASA Headquarters! I determined to stop there on my return. Several hours and a videotape later, I was walking up the steps of HQ. I think it was passing through the door I thought that it might not be a good idea. I was wearing my Space Camp jacket and hat (a bit presumptuous), and was walking into a Federal agency without an invitation or appointment. Thinking fast, I stepped to the receptionist and asked, "Does NASA have any jobs for teachers?", expecting to be politely shown the door. Instead I heard, "I don't know, would you like to talk to someone in personnel?" It was a good thing I came alone, as a few minutes later I was upstairs describing to a personnel officer my qualifications and goals. She recommended I visit with the contract monitor for the Aerospace Education Services Program, Larry Bilbrough. I remember as she was talking to Mr. Bilbrough on the phone, she asked me again where I was from. After relaying that information, I was told to go directly to Larry's office. He talked with me for about an hour, finally asking me the question, "Why do you want to leave teaching?" My reply was, "I don't want to leave teaching. I like doing what I'm doing. I see this as the next step in my career as an educator." That apparently was the right answer, as too many applicants are teachers burned out in the classroom; they do not function well on this program. He called Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, and immediately asked that an application be mailed to my home. I left elated. I arrived back to my family a couple hours late, but with the news "I applied for a job with NASA!"

The application was waiting when we returned home to Tennessee. I filled it out, mailed it in, and expected a call any minute. I informed my principal and department chair, but told no one else. I could bear being passed over, as I really was enjoying my teaching assignment, but I did not want people constantly coming up and saying, "So, how about that NASA job?" Too painful. Someone I did tell was my best man and wife, and of course the rest my family. School ended, summer languished, school began, and I figured that I would be doing my very best as a teacher of Eighth Grade. After all, I still had three years toward my ten year goal. Christmas found us back in Chicago, where we paid a visit to my best man and his family. After hellos, my friend's wife asked, "So, how about that NASA job?" I sighed to myself, "Exactly why I didn't tell anybody else!" But I gracefully replied that I was perfectly happy doing what I was doing. I hoped that would be the last I heard of it. It was for a week.

The afternoon we returned home, I received a phone call from Oklahoma State University, offering me a position with the Aerospace Education Services Program at Johnson Space Center or Goddard Space Flight Center. I was thrilled. I asked which position would I have the better chance at getting. I was told it wasn't a chance, I had a job, and a choice of where to go. I chose JSC in Houston, Texas. If I couldn't be an astronaut, I could live where they do. That night we celebrated. I began my career as an Aerospace Education Specialist on March 1, 1989.

Houston was very rewarding professionally. To get to my office I drove by one of three remaining Saturn V's and walked past Cooper's Faith 7 Mercury capsule and Gemini 8. I also traveled as far as South Dakota, and that put a big strain on my family. When the opportunity came to transfer to Kennedy Space Center, with its smaller territory and closeness to family, I jumped on it. I did have some reservations, as I so wanted my children to grow up brushing shoulders with the astronauts. My assurance came when I returned home from my last trip. That night, my daughter, Jessica, who had spent the week with a friend at Vacation Bible School, asked me to attend Parent Night. When we arrived I was greeted by congenial fellow who seemed vaguely familiar. When we entered the sanctuary, I saw that Space had been the theme of the week, and

the room was decorated complete with a blue flight suit like I had seen at Space Camp. Then I noticed the flight suit had patches that only an astronaut would have access to, and realized that the man who greeted me was Dave Hilmers, three time shuttle astronaut. I leaned over to Jessica and said, "Did you know that guy is a real astronaut?" She said, "Yeah, he was my teacher." If my daughter could have memories of being taught in Bible School by an astronaut, I could leave Houston content.

Working at KSC has been awesome, in the classical sense of the word. Driving to work I still crane my neck to catch the first glimpse of the Vehicle Assembly Building appear from behind the forest. My job assignment enables me to go inside the giant structure, escorting groups of educators and VIP's. I have taken the elevator on the launch pad to the Crew Access Arm and walked across to the entry hatch of orbiter Discovery. I have flown on NASA's KC-135 and experienced weightlessness. As I travel across Florida, Georgia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, I get to share the excitement and inspiration of our Nation's space program. It has been said that to be a success, discover what you really love to do, then find a way to get paid to do it. I am a success.