

Space Center Hosts VIP Guest

The Downey Patriot – April 2, 2010

by Henry Veneracion, Staff Writer



DOWNEY – Summing up his space trip as the flight engineer in the STS-128 Discovery shuttle mission to the International Space Station Aug. 28-Sept. 11, 2009, visiting NASA astronaut Jose Hernandez said, “It was just an amazing experience.”

Hernandez, who acknowledged his humble beginnings and said he didn’t learn how to speak English until he was 12 but later earned a master’s in electrical and computer engineering in 1986 from UC-Santa Barbara on a full scholarship, was a guest speaker Monday at the Columbia Memorial Space Center.

He obtained his bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering in 1984 from the University of the Pacific, which in 2006 conferred on him an honorary doctorate.

The visit coincided with the center’s student volunteer recruitment day, with the center actively seeking student volunteers to assist in its science- and space-oriented programs and activities.

“The recruitment was successful,” said executive director Jon Betthausen. “We are looking at some five to six very good candidates right now. This is just a start, so we hope to have more.”

Another special guest was Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-34), who, before she introduced Hernandez to the collection of officials and parents who came along with their kids, briefly recounted Downey’s rich aerospace history and said, “I’m glad to see the kids with their parents today.”

Saying he was honored to be present at the event and likewise complimenting the city (“This place is unique”), State Assemblyman Hector de la Torre sounded the day’s dominant theme of early hardships and eventual achievement as he recounted how his parents from Mexico didn’t have a college education either, but he was able to get one and got elected to the state legislature.

“All this because of education,” he said.

The youngest of four children and growing up in a migrant farming family from Mexico, astronaut Hernandez recalled his childhood: “We traveled ‘the California circuit’, going from Mexico to southern California each March, then working northward to the Stockton area by November, picking strawberries and cucumbers at farms along the route. Then we would return to Mexico for Christmas, and start the cycle all over again come spring.”

Born in 1962 in French Camp, California, Hernandez considers Stockton, CA to be his hometown. Hernandez said it took years from the time he dreamt of actually becoming an astronaut to when he was selected (out of an initial roster of 100 aspirants) for the astronaut training program in 2004. More years of training were to follow until “I finally went into space” in 2009. (His inspiration was Franklin Chang-Diaz, the first Hispanic-American chosen to travel into space, whom he was later to meet face-to-face as he was being interviewed for the program).

“My first view of earth from space gave me an incredible feeling,” he said, noting how thin the atmosphere is that surrounds planet earth. “We really have to take care of it.

Also, if our leaders can go up there and see that our continents are connected, I’m sure there’ll be less conflict in this world.” He said the same thing when he was a guest of Oprah.

In the Q & A that followed, Hernandez patiently fielded questions mostly from the young ones. To the question, “What was the scariest part of the space flight?”, he said it was the blast-off when he had to cope with the increased G-force. Asked if he saw any space debris out in space, Hernandez answered in the affirmative and at one point the crew had to maneuver the space shuttle to avoid a potential threat. What food did you eat? “We ate dehydrated food, just like camping food.”

And so it went, with Hernandez pointing out the awesome fact that among the activities the STS-128 mission conducted were doing three spacewalks and transferring over 18,000 pounds of supplies and equipment to the orbiting station, all accomplished in 217 orbits of the earth, traveling over 5.7 million miles in 332 hours and 53 minutes, finally landing at Edwards Air Force Base due to weather conditions.

His message to the kids: “If I can do it, you can do it, too. Go after your dream and back it up with a good education.”

Published: The Downey Patriot – April 2, 2010 – Volume 8 – Issue 50