

Migrant worker one day, Astronaut the next

Failing that I am incredibly proud and inspired by the fact that one of the astronauts on the current mission comes from my hometown of Stockton, California.

Even more inspiring is the fact that Jose Hernandez began his life as the child of migrant farm workers. His own childhood included spending weekends and summers right next to them, picking in the hot sun. His parents used this to their advantage, reminding Jose that **without a good education** he could look forward to a life of manual labor, and he took their words to heart. He worked hard to overcome language and cultural barriers to graduate from high school and then to go on to the University of Pacific, where he graduated with high honors and a degree in engineering. His family joined in his sacrifices, making the decision to **skip the traditional returns to Mexico** when the picking season ended. Instead they remained in Stockton, working hard at any job they could find to pay the bills. That journey began in 1969, the year man first landed on the moon and the year Jose turned 8 years old. Some 40 years later, he is preparing to journey to the stars, and I don't think he'll be going alone. His friends, his family, his community and the many mentors who have helped him over the years will be going along with him. ^[1] Never before has the community sent an astronaut to space. That changes late Monday night - weather and other factors permitting - and all of the community should embrace the success story that is Jose Hernandez. The 47-year-old will be strapped into his seat aboard the space shuttle Discovery when it pierces the nighttime Florida sky as he becomes one of approximately 485 human beings from 39 countries who have journeyed into space. We should celebrate the story of this man, one of four children of migrant farm workers from Mexico who did not begin speaking English until age 12. He's a dreamer, as we all are at times. He's also an accomplisher who is grateful for what the city of Stockton, in many ways, has meant to his life. He wrapped his arms around this community as he prepared for the trip of a lifetime. ^[2] KENNEDY SPACE CENTER, FL -- The space shuttle "Discovery" is scheduled to head into space at 10:36 tonight and a northern California man is one of the seven crewmembers. Jose Hernandez considers Stockton his home. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of the Pacific, graduating in 1984, before earning a Master of Science in electrical and computer engineering from U.C. Santa Barbara. ^[3]

Jose Hernandez' journey to space started in the farm fields of California. Today, he is one of seven astronauts who will be onboard the space shuttle Discovery to the International Space Station this week. ^[4] Now Jose Hernandez, NASA astronaut, is about to rocket into orbit. His parents will be in Florida next week for space shuttle Discovery's launch, as will his two older brothers and sister, who also worked the fields in the 1960s and 1970s. ^[5]

Hernandez is a Pacific graduate and a current regent. "This is a culmination of years of dedication and work," said Tom Zuckerman, chairman of the Board of Regents. "Jose. we're all just real proud of him and want to provide him all the support and recognition he deserves. His contributions to the community and his qualities are just exemplary." Angel Picon, a close friend and former director of the Stockton-based Jose Hernandez Foundation, said he would be remiss to not attend the launch live. "For me, it's an honor to be there," said Picon. "His story really resonates in the Central Valley, not just for Latinos but I think everyone can be inspired." Stockton Mayor Ann Johnston was one of those invited, but will be unable to attend because the launch date was rescheduled so many times that she now has conflicts with other commitments. She expressed disappointment. "We're so proud of Jose, and we're going to be watching and cheering him on from Stockton," Johnston said. ^[6]

Jose Hernandez, the first astronaut from Stockton to embark on a space mission, is ready to discharge months of rigorous and uncomfortable practice - and years of longing - to travel in space.^[7] Within minutes, astronaut Jose Hernandez will be higher and traveling faster than any other San Joaquin County native ever. By the time the mission ends 13 days later, he will have traveled farther, too. Not bad for a kid who once worked in the fields alongside his migrant parents.^[8] Jose Hernandez, a former migrant worker, is soon to be the first bilingual Twittering astronaut.^[9]

Forty years ago, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Next week, Jose Hernandez will be in space and - in addition to his main job as flight engineer - also will be in charge of sending Twitter feeds from the crew (which you can follow in The Record and on recordnet.com). That's one small step for man, one giant Tweet for mankind.^[2] For that matter, not bad for a young man who graduated from University of the Pacific. Of course, Hernandez isn't the man he is today because he was an ordinary kid even back then. He had brains and goals and learned how to put those assets together with will power. Obviously, too, in his line of work it helps to have courage, insatiable curiosity and thirst for adventure. Space shuttle flights, save the first one April 12, 1981, and the two that ended in tragedy, don't get much attention these days. There's no more blanket television coverage like Alan Shepherd had when he made the nation's first manned space flight, a 15-minute suborbital mission in 1961. Or when Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon in 1969. Those were days before technology was so ubiquitous and assumed.^[8]

Let's celebrate University of the Pacific's impact on Hernandez. He stayed in town to attend college and graduated in 1984. Some people will wonder why The Record chose to scrap its traditional layout for the Sunday paper today. Our entire front section - 10 pages - is dedicated to the life of Hernandez, his family and his upcoming mission. The reason is simple: This is historic for our community, and it's very possible that the path taken by Hernandez can inspire children in Stockton and San Joaquin County to dream big - and emphasize education.^[2] Let's really try, all of you combative Stockton Unified School District factions, to jointly celebrate one of the district's stories of accomplishment. The time Hernandez spent at Fillmore School and his high school alma mater, Franklin, did so much to prepare him for this day. That's because the district is filled with teachers who care about their students and make the commitment to help them overcome challenges. In this case it is Fillmore teacher Marlesse Young, who persuaded the Hernandez family to stop returning to Mexico for lengthy stays each year so that the children's educational process could avoid constant interruption. "He said to me, because of this, I turned his family's life around.^[2] Hernandez, 47, vividly recalls being dusty, sweaty and tired in the back seat of the family's car after a hard day of labor. His father would look back at his children and tell them, "Remember this feeling because if you guys don't do well in school, this is your future." "That was pretty powerful," Hernandez recalled.^[5]

Hernandez now jokes about working in the fields in California alongside his Mexican migrant parents and older brothers and sister. It was back-breaking labor, picking cucumbers and tomatoes. His parents, Salvador and Julia Hernandez, only made it through the third grade and told their children if they wanted a better life, they needed an education.^[4] Let's applaud the will, desire and brilliance of Hernandez, who will embark on a 13-day mission that includes a rendezvous with the International Space Station. Let's celebrate the parenting of Salvador and Julia Hernandez, who overcame hardship and life's challenges to instill in Jose - and their other children - the importance of getting an education. Let's recognize the impact of strong familial ties, with Hernandez's wife, Adela, and their five children giving him so much support in his endeavors.^[2] During a 13-day flight in space that leaves Tuesday, Hernandez plans to tweet in English and Spanish. Jose Hernandez is of Mexican descent and Mexico's president is so excited about his mission he invited him to visit the presidential residence Saturday.^[9]

I just want to take that test," Hernandez said about three weeks ago. "The only thing that scares me is SAS. They say that a little over half the astronauts get space adaptation sickness," said Hernandez, a graduate of Franklin High School and a mechanical engineering graduate of University of the Pacific.^[7] To Hernandez, Chang-Diaz was a barrier breaker. "He knocked down the wall -- Hispanics can be astronauts now and everything I read about his background, he came from Costa Rica, from very humble beginnings, he struggled with the English language and despite all that he was able to become an astronaut," Hernandez said. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering, and went on to work at the Lawrence Livermore labs, where he became an expert in x-ray physics. Later, he helped with the disposal of Russian nuclear materials, and eventually he became an engineer at the Johnson Space Center, where he was selected as an astronaut in 2004 after repeated applications.^[4] Hernandez moved to Houston in 2001 to work at Johnson Space Center as an engineer. He was selected as an astronaut in 2004, after 12 years of trying. There are 0 responses to this story. Comments are the sole responsibility of the person posting them.^[5] Neil Gonzales, a former Record reporter, and staff photographer Calixtro Romias journeyed to Houston several years ago for an in-depth story after Hernandez had been accepted into the astronaut program.^[2]

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STOCKTON - Bank of Stockton President Doug Eberhardt said he has dreamed of being able to see a live space shuttle launch since he was a child. He never knew that his first opportunity to do so would double as a show of support to a friend and colleague. ^[6] Lack of public attention has a way of being translated into a lack of political support, meaning money. NASA is about to retire its aging fleet of space shuttles.^[8]

NASA managers have cleared "Discovery" for launch and forecasters say there's an 80% chance of good weather at launch time. Things could be complicated by thunderstorms this afternoon, when the shuttle is being fueled.^[3] Discovery is scheduled to fire away in the Florida night skies from Kennedy Space Center at 10:36 p.m. today if weather permits. The thunderous roar of the rocketing shuttle Discovery will resonate in his ears, and his body will plunge deeper in his seat. His cheeks, ears, and lips will flap backward in the gripping pull of 4 G's, as Discovery thrusts into orbit at 17,000 miles per hour.^[7]

As many of you may know the space shuttle is scheduled for a Monday evening/Tuesday morning (depending on your location) launch.^[1] The mission management team at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration approved continuing the launch countdown. Launch director Pete Nickolenko said Sunday he is 96 percent certain that the launch will take place tonight.^[7]

"You see it on TV and always wish you could see it live," Eberhardt said. "It's really great when you get to support a friend." Hernandez invited a fairly large contingent from his hometown to watch the launch.^[6]

Many University of the Pacific administrators and regents will join the astronaut's family members and friends.^[6]

SOURCES

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