

Stockton Astronaut Wonders About Effects Of Shuttle Delay

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The recurring delays of Discovery's launch could increasingly hamper Jose Hernandez's chances to fly in a space shuttle.

But the Stockton-raised astronaut candidate and former migrant worker remained optimistic that Discovery will usher in a new era of space exploration in which he could find himself stepping on the moon.

"NASA wants to make sure to do the right thing and get to the bottom of this before it's OK to launch," Hernandez said in a telephone interview from his Houston home Wednesday, hours after NASA scrapped Discovery's takeoff. "We got to be patient. It'll be happening."

As NASA makes repairs to get the shuttle off the ground, Hernandez continues to push ahead with his intense astronaut training, primarily at Johnson Space Center near his residence.

As if he's not busy enough, Hernandez also is working on other projects close to his heart, including a children's book that would show youngsters that dreams can come true with determination and education.

Hernandez, 42, has been training as an astronaut since NASA named him one of 11 new candidates more than a year ago. He and his classmates have several more months of training before they become full-fledged astronauts eligible for a mission assignment.

Hernandez hopes at least one assignment will be a shuttle flight before NASA retires that fleet in 2010 in favor of a proposed successor dubbed the Crew Exploration Vehicle.

"I would like to fly on the shuttle and visit the international space station," he said. "Certainly, any delay that occurs basically reduces the number of total flights of the shuttle ... from now until 2010."

NASA held off on Discovery's launch Wednesday because of a fuel-sensor malfunction. The shuttle previously was scheduled to launch about two months ago, but NASA officials had lingering concerns about debris falling off the shuttle's external fuel tank.

If Discovery doesn't fly by the end of July, the next opportunity is in September. Discovery would be the first shuttle to go into orbit since the Columbia catastrophe in February 2003.

Although disappointed about the latest delay, Hernandez said, "If something doesn't look right, we have to pause, look at it and move forward."

But whether or not it's in a shuttle, Hernandez remains on track for spaceflight. His astronaut class is targeted to pioneer the new spacecraft, which NASA plans to build by 2014. NASA's long-term vision also calls for finishing the half-built space station and sending humans to the moon and Mars.

So far, Hernandez's astronaut class "is doing very, very well," NASA spokeswoman Nicole Cloutier-Lemasters said. "Everyone is impressed with their tests and teamwork."

The class is learning the systems of the shuttle and Space Station, she said. Candidates soon will get a course in geology to understand different rock formations and terrain, which will be useful on a mission to the moon or Mars.

While Hernandez works to fulfill his dream of spaceflight, he also wants to inspire children through a book reflecting his life struggles and triumphs.

"It will show them that dreaming is not enough, but with hard work and education, they can make it happen," said Hernandez, who grew up helping his family work Stockton-area fields. He went on to graduate from Franklin High School and University of the Pacific and became an engineer.

Longtime friend Angel Picon, who has teamed with Hernandez on the book, said the illustrated project should be out by the end of the year.

Picon also said he's helping Hernandez set up an educational foundation that would offer scholarships and give families the information they need about applying for college.

"We want to make sure we're pushing all the youth to graduate from high school and ... college," Picon said.

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