

## **Eleven Americans, including Mainer, graduate as astronauts**

**By Pam Easton, Associated Press Writer | February 11, 2006**

SPACE CENTER, Houston --When her third grade art teacher challenged her to turn a ketchup bottle into something representing her dream job, Dottie Metcalf-Lindenburger created a papier-mache spacewalking astronaut.

"It's not pretty. I hope I don't look like the ketchup bottle," said Metcalf-Lindenburger, who was among 11 Americans -- including a man who grew up in Maine -- and three Japanese candidates to graduate Friday from astronaut training to become full-fledged astronauts.

The white papier-mache covered ketchup bottle with a black life support pack on the front now sits in her home office among other space memorabilia, including a picture of John Glenn.

"My mom actually pulled it out last year and said, 'Do you remember this?'" said Metcalf-Lindenburger, wearing a blue astronaut flight suit and matching earrings on Friday at a training facility at NASA's Johnson Space Center.

"I must have heard about a spacewalk or something and it really intrigued me," the 30-year-old former science teacher turned astronaut said of her childhood art project.

Metcalf-Lindenburger, who told her science students in Washington state to "dream big and go for your dreams," decided to take her own advice and applied to become an astronaut.

After 18 months of intense training, she and her classmates are ready to tackle the challenges that await them -- even if they never get to space. NASA plans to retire the shuttle in 2010, develop a new vehicle and is readjusting to a new vision, which will take Americans back to the moon and onto Mars.

"It was extremely challenging, but it was also a lot of fun," newly pinned astronaut Shane Kimbrough said of the training. "We had a great time."

NASA was honest with all the astronaut candidates about the chances of flying, said Chris Cassidy, 35, among the astronauts who graduated Friday. Cassidy grew up in York, Maine, where he played basketball at York High School.<sup>22</sup>

"When we were selected, they said, 'Hey, are you still interested in coming to work here if there is a chance you may not get to fly?' And every single one of us said, 'Absolutely. At least we are standing in the right line to fly.'"

The new astronauts' training schedule included survival training, scuba diving, flying planes and learning about the systems on the space shuttle and space station.

Metcalf-Lindenburger said her least favorite was the "helicopter dunk."

"The helicopter drops into water and then it turns upside down and you are blindfolded and you have to get out," she recalled. "I wasn't afraid, but it was a very uncomfortable experience. We got through it as a team."

Teamwork and bonding were important aspects throughout the group's training, which extended beyond the classroom and into personal time. The newest astronauts, who previously had jobs ranging from educators to surgeons, said they would meet up before the sun came up to train for marathons and then go to the space center to hit the books on weekends.

"We transitioned from being complete strangers from different parts of the country, from different backgrounds, different cultures to ... being like family members," said Jose Hernandez, who worked as a migrant farm worker when he was a child and was the first in his family to go to college.

Hernandez, 43, said he and astronaut classmate, Joe Acaba, would trade services. Hernandez would help Acaba work on his house in exchange for Acaba baby-sitting Hernandez's five children so he could take his wife on a date.

Hernandez said when he became a little too boastful about his new job, his daughter found a way to ground him.

"You know dad, you look like Papa Smurf," Hernandez's 4-year-old told him. "So there you go. They bring you right back down."

But the ground isn't where the new astronauts want to stay.

Hernandez wants to fly at least one shuttle mission before the aging vehicle is retired. Kimbrough, a former military helicopter pilot, said the entire astronaut class has pushed forward with the intention of flying one day.

"If we are lucky, we will get to fly one of these days," the 38-year-old said. "When the first one of us gets the call that they are assigned to a mission, I think we are all just going to be ecstatic."

Until then, Metcalf-Lindenburger is simply excited about her new real-world classroom.

"Every day is different at this job," she said. "The last two years have flown by -- no pun intended."■

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