

## Stockton's Hernandez may soon get his turn to sit in shuttle cockpit

NEIL GONZALES  
Record Staff Writer

Published Monday, Jan 9, 2006

Stockton's Jose Hernandez could find himself sitting in the cockpit of the space shuttle Discovery before its target launch in May.

He won't be one of the crew members to take flight, but he'd be flipping the switches and checking the shuttle's systems to ensure everything is a go for the astronauts who will head to space.

"It would be the next best thing to flying in it - being inside the orbiter," the Stockton-raised astronaut candidate said. "That's going to be real neat."

Hernandez ultimately will get his turn to fly. He'll be a key step closer in a month when he and 10 other astronaut candidates graduate from a two-year training program.

Graduation ceremonies are expected to be Feb. 10 at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Hernandez, 43, who grew up in a migrant farm-working family and became an electrical engineer, also will receive other honors back in his hometown. He has been invited to receive an honorary doctoral degree from University of the Pacific, his alma mater, and to give the commencement speech at the school's graduation ceremonies May 20.

"Jose Hernandez is a great example of the kind of leader we like all Pacific students to be," Pacific spokesman Joe Brennan said. "We are very, very proud to count him as one of our graduates. He started from humble beginnings and has risen to the top of his profession."

In a telephone interview from Houston, Hernandez said it is a big sense of accomplishment to reach this point.

"I felt I was in graduate school all over again, but everyone in the class is an A student. It was a higher level."

Out of that NASA program, Hernandez and his fellow astronaut candidates have learned to fly jet planes, undergone survival training, experienced simulated weightlessness and learned shuttle operations.



"They are in the tail end of their training," said NASA spokeswoman Nicole Cloutier-Lemasters. "Everything I've heard is that the entire class has been very good."

After they finish that program, Hernandez and his classmates will continue onto specialized training while waiting to be assigned to a shuttle mission. Hernandez hopes to catch at least one shuttle flight before NASA retires the fleet in 2010 in favor of a planned successor dubbed the Crew Exploration Vehicle.

No matter how he gets there, Hernandez remains on track for spaceflight. His astronaut class is targeted to pioneer the new spacecraft that NASA plans to build by 2012.

NASA's long-term vision also calls for sending people to Mars and back to the moon.

But for the immediate future, Cloutier-Lemasters said, the newest astronauts could get on-the-job training in helping to prepare Discovery for launch.

The busy Hernandez also has helped establish a nonprofit educational foundation in Stockton to award college scholarships.

"The mission of the foundation is to really help students graduate from high school and pursue higher education, and encourage the kids to go into the science field," said Angel Picon, the group's chairman.

Hernandez has also co-written a children's book based on his life and career. It should be out this year and is being illustrated by three San Joaquin Delta College students, who have been inspired by Hernandez's accomplishments.

"I want to finish school," said Jorge Moreno, 24, one of the illustrators, "and he's my role model."



Alejandro Rocha, left, and Angel Picon are helping Jose Hernandez, a NASA astronaut-in-training, establish a nonprofit educational foundation in Stockton

Credit: David Finch /The Record

Contact reporter Neil Gonzales at (209) 239-3361 or [ngonzale@recordnet.com](mailto:ngonzale@recordnet.com)