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Stars In His Eyes - French Camp Native Pursues Astronaut Dream

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HOUSTON - The KC-135 climbs steeply into the crystal-clear azure skies 40,000 feet above the Gulf of Mexico. Jose Hernandez, a passenger on this flight, feels his chest tighten under nearly 2 g's of force. The plane's nose tips, and the aircraft dives toward the sea. Hernandez's body is now weightless; it lifts in the air and floats inside the padded fuselage along with the other blue-clad bodies.

The French Camp native had dreamed about this moment for a long time.

As a youngster toiling in the agricultural fields around Stockton, he'd occasionally glance at the baking summer sky and wonder what it would be like to be an astronaut. It was just over a year ago that the Franklin High School graduate was selected to be among the current 11-member astronaut class.

And for him, the KC-135 flight in October was just a taste of actually being in space.

"It just makes you thirsty for more," said Hernandez, 42, an athletically built, compact man with an ever-present smile.

"To me, it's all about zero g. It's getting up to space."

Obtaining that goal was something that belies where he started.

Hernandez was raised in a Spanish-speaking, Mexican-American family and struggled to learn English in grade school; he set out to excel in the classroom.

He was encouraged by his parents to do well. They told him the tough, gritty life of migrant farm work was all that would be left for him if he didn't get an education.

Hernandez was later inspired by Franklin Chang-Diaz, who in 1980 became the first Latino selected by NASA for the astronaut program.

Hernandez went on to earn an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering from University of the Pacific and a master's degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He then worked in engineering posts at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, plus a Department of Energy assignment in a project to dismantle Russia's nuclear arsenal.

Hernandez has worked hard to show that he belongs in the elite astronaut corps.

But there are many variables.

President Bush's Vision for Space Exploration, detailed last year, calls for resuming shuttle flights that have been grounded for more than two years since the Columbia catastrophe. Shuttles are to be phased out in favor of a newer spacecraft.

Bush's plan also focuses on completing construction of the international space station and eventually sending humans to Mars.

However, those plans suffered a setback with the delayed launch of the shuttle Discovery.

Discovery was scheduled for liftoff from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida any time from today through June 3.

But lingering concerns about the safety of the shuttle have pushed that target date back to July 13 -31.

As those flights get delayed, so does any potential flight that Hernandez would be on.

As it is now, he would not be on a flight until about 10 because of his lengthy training and the number of astronauts who are scheduled ahead of him.

"The whole thing is, you do your work," Hernandez said during a recent interview at his Houston home. "Hopefully, everything else takes care of itself."

Astronaut U

The Johnson Space Center is about miles southeast of downtown Houston in the popular Clear Lake area near the lip of the Gulf of Mexico.

Hernandez, his wife, Adela, and their five children, ages 2 to 10, live in a large, red-brick home about six miles from the Johnson Center.

Adela Hernandez said she is thrilled with the prospect of her husband going into space. "It's an amazing thing. You know it was his dream, and now it's coming true," she said. "But it's still so unreal. It's just an overwhelming feeling of joy and pride."

However, she admits she tries to avoid thinking about the risks. "I'm pretty calm about it, because he hasn't been assigned to a mission yet," she said. "I'm taking it day by day. I know he's just in training, and along the way, I'm trying to learn as much as I can."

Johnson is the heart of NASA, housing Mission Control, which directs shuttle and other space activities. It's also the home base for the corps of about 100 active astronauts and candidates.

The center is a sprawling complex of mundane, 1960s-era government buildings.

All the impressive stuff is inside.

Building 9, for instance, is a warehouse holding full-scale mockups of the shuttle and space-station modules. Astronaut candidates use these mockups to learn the vehicles' various systems and operations.

Building 30 has Mission Control - both the new and the old. There's today's flight control room of sleek terminals. Then, there's the historic room of small-screened green consoles used during Apollo missions - a site now preserved as a national landmark.

Hernandez's astronaut class is targeted to operate the proposed successor of the space shuttle, which is to be retired by 10. The current plan envisions that the new craft, dubbed the Crew Exploration Vehicle, will be built by 14 or even sooner.

For Hernandez, the center is Astronaut University, an intense, hands-on graduate program to learn everything from jet flying to the Russian language to life-support systems.

One of Hernandez's goals is to qualify to perform spacewalks.

"It's the most coveted job," he said.

For this training, candidates don a puffy white spacesuit and jump into the Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory pool.

A migrant boy's dream

Salvador Hernandez chalked it up to any little boy's dream - the youngest of his four children says he's going to be an astronaut someday.

The father didn't believe it would actually occur. "Of course not," Salvador Hernandez said at his ranch north of Stockton.

It just turned out his son wasn't like any other boy.

The father pushed his children to apply themselves in school and told them they could be whatever they wanted to be - something better than the life he led as a migrant farm worker and truck driver.

Jose Hernandez and his siblings did not need much encouragement on that matter, because they grew up as migrant workers - picking cherries, tomatoes and other crops.

"For me, picking cucumbers, I thought, was the most difficult," Jose Hernandez said. "You were standing up but bending at the waist and dragging a bucket along the rows.

"At 5:30 in the morning, the rows would be freshly irrigated, so you're muddy. Sometimes, you'd step on an overripe cucumber and smell the stench. In the afternoon, you'd be hot, dusty and thirsty."

By November, after the crops were in, the Hernandez family would travel back to the parents' hometown of La Piedad, Mexico.

Salvador Hernandez and his wife, Julia, would round up the children, pack suitcases with clothes and cardboard boxes with toys and gifts into their large, gas-guzzling, brown

Lincoln Continental for the 1,700-mile trip south. It took Salvador Hernandez less than three days of almost nonstop driving to travel that distance.

For something to eat along the way, the father would heat cans of Campbell's soup by placing them in a crevice on top of the engine manifold.

"To this day, I hate Campbell's soup," said Leticia Corona, Jose Hernandez's sister. "I hated those trips."

Not for Jose Hernandez. "For me, it was more of an adventure," he said. And he still eats Campbell's soup.

The family made that trek back and forth every year until Jose Hernandez's schoolteacher paid them a visit at their home, then in east Stockton.

"She told me not to travel too much," Salvador Hernandez said. "She told me to stay in one place, because the kids were losing time in school. So I stopped traveling. It looks like it paid off."

The call

Two previous times, Jose Hernandez got calls saying he didn't make the cut, but to try again.

After those setbacks, he began to think it was time to set this dream aside, move on and focus on his engineering career.

Then, one day a little after lunch time, the phone rang at his office at the Johnson Space Center.

It was Col. Bob Cabana, head of the flight crew operations directorate at NASA at the time, on the line.

Cabana asked Hernandez how the project he was doing was coming along. Good, Hernandez replied.

Then Hernandez heard, "Well, I hope you have a good replacement, because we'd like you to be one of the new astronauts."

Seven years after he applied, Hernandez had been accepted.

"It was sort of a surreal feeling," he said. "You're hearing the words, but you can't believe you're hearing the words. Then I thought, 'What have I gotten myself into?'"

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