

# OSU/NASA Education Projects: Aerospace Education Services Program (AESP) Archive

Oklahoma State University-Stillwater, Oklahoma

**Aerospace Education by the Mile by Gordon W. Eskridge. Written 2001.**

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Once there was a middle age, middle school, Earth Science teacher, who said, "While I enjoy teaching, I don't seem to fit in here ". Then he got the CALL!!! from Charles Anderson. "Do you know anyone who would like to work for NASA and travel all over the United States giving live performances about what NASA has done and will do?". I carefully weighed the two options, "Work with 8th graders for rest of my life." or "go to work with NASA?"

Well NASA did not need to look any further. I called OSU and returned the application in the mail the same day that I got it. Later I received a call for an interview with Dr. Ken Wiggins. He said that they had an opening at the Johnson Space Center, but you have to be able to get along with Jim Poindexter.

They were sending me to Houston Texas. When I picked up the tickets from the AESP office it was located on the first floor over the automatic chicken plucking machine, which was located in the basement of the poultry science building. The office smelled during the long hot summers of Stillwater Oklahoma of steamy hot chicken feathers and boiling chicken meat. The machines are noisy and shook the building. The schedule on the tickets said that I would have a long lay over in Dallas, so I picked up some reading material in the teacher education room next door to the office. They were education briefs that told what happened on each flight of the Space Shuttle.

I flew out from Oklahoma City to Dallas, Texas, which took only twenty-five minutes, and there I had a two-hour layover so I read the STS briefs. Upon arrival at JSC, I remembered having remarked to my wife, a few years before while on a tour of JSC, "This would be a fun place to work", and now I might have the chance.

Well, the job interview was with a short man with a Napoleon complex who asked me, "What is an electroflorices machine and what was it used for on the last STS flight?" I had just read about this in the briefs and told him, "It is an electronic-filtering machine and it was used to separate the Bata particles out of solution to help in the study of a cure for diabetes by the Johnson and Johnson pharmaceutical company". He said, "You are really up on this stuff." I said, "Yes sir". The interview was short and sweet and ended with Jim saying, "How would you like to come to work here?" I said, "I would like to very much". He then called OSU and talked with Dr. Wiggins he said "I think we have a winner". Well, time was running short to make the flight back to Oklahoma and the next thing I remember is that Jim said "I know a short cut to the airport and I can get you there in no time". Well I missed the plane and had to sit in the airport and wait on standby for the next flight. I returned to the classroom and awaited my fate.

The next week OSU called and said that I needed to meet with the people from NASA headquarters and they were meeting with the AESP group in New Orleans next week and could I meet them there? I said, "Sure", and off we went. Well I thought part of NASA's hiring strategy must be asking current event questions about NASA so every evening after we returned to the hotel room I studied about NASA.

No one from NASA headquarters approached me for "the interview" during the four days of the conference. Then, as we were standing in the line to check out of the hotel, Larry Bilbrough came over to me and said "We need to talk" and I thought, "Well here it comes, they have found some one else to take the job, and he is going to let me know now". He said "What does your wife think about taking this job and your being on the road for long periods of time?". I told him that "We already have five daughters and she wants me on the road". He laughed and said; "You're hired".

For 15 years I have lived in motels over half of each year, but I can still remember a few special ones. The most interesting one was Moriarty, New Mexico. After having driven through a snowstorm for over 15 hours to travel 300 miles. I arrived at the quaint little drive-in motel. The little old man at the desk at 2 A.M. said, "I was holding this room just for you". The motel had been built in the nineteen twenties and you could drive up and park beside the room in the cute twin covered arched parking spaces that divided the cottage styled rooms from each other. "Great", I said and drove into the space provided and got out of the snow. The space was very narrowly built for the cars of an earlier time. I could not get out of the driver's side of the van, but the passenger side of the van had a middle door that slid to the side. So I climbed over my things, opened the door of the van and inched around the screen door to open the main door with the skeleton key provided.

The first thing that I noticed was that the room was cold and then I found the reason why. The window would not shut all the way and the newspaper that had been stuffed into the opening had been blown out by the snowstorm. So after replacing the newspaper in the opening I cleaned up the two inches of snow that was piled on the floor. I turned up the gas flames in the free standing stove with no grates, and the room began to quickly warm up. I went to the bathroom and found the commode had no seat on it. I turned the water on, at the sink; and it was brown for some time. I got ready for bed and pulled the string to turn off the bare light bulb hanging from the wire over the bed. Then I lay down on the bed and was folded up by the sag in the middle of the mattress. After pulling up the WWII army blankets I dropped off to sleep the four hours until time to get ready to do the school program.

After I unfolded myself the next morning and got ready to take a shower, I replaced the newspaper back in the window that had blown out during the night and went to the bathroom. The shower was a pipe without a shower head on it and a plastic curtain that you pulled around you and I turned the water on to let it turn semi-clear only to find out the hot water side did not work. The drain was a four-inch hole in the center of a three-foot square cement box in the floor. Total cost for these deluxe accommodations was thirteen dollars including tax.

I arrived at the cafe at seven A.M. to find several men dressed in heavy clothing and bib overalls. I ordered breakfast and while I was waiting a man entered wearing a three-piece suit and an overcoat. He asked if I was the man from NASA and I told him that I was. He introduced himself as the principal of the school that I was to visit that day and told me that school was closed because of the snowstorm. The reason it was closed was because they could not get the buses out of the bus lot. We rescheduled the school visit for the next year. The motel is no longer there and across the street from where it was located is a new Supper 8 motel.

I have driven a van filled with all types of aerospace related equipment such as spacecraft, a spacesuit, models of a spacestation, spacefood, sleep-restraint, airplanes, world globe, satellite communication simulator, satellites, the NASA rocket family, a model of the Space Transportation System, projectors and computers, cloth covers for tables, a bicycle wheel gyroscope, microphones, cables, speakers, amplifiers, tape-players, CD players, Lazerdisk players, 30X40 pictures of the Sun and planets, telescopes, classroom demonstration equipment, publications of NASA curriculum and enough personal equipment to keep me on the road up to five weeks at a time.

I have unloaded, hauled the stuff upstairs and down, setup, demonstrated, entertained, audiences young and old, put the equipment back in the boxes hauled them back to the van, reloaded them in to the van so they all fit close enough to close the doors, enough times to build muscles enough look like Charles Atlas, but I don't.

I have traveled a distance equal to several times around the world, and I have the second largest phone bill in the U.S.A. I have met millions of school children and teachers. I have been to many places like: House, New Mexico; Parachute, Colorado; Bonesteel Nebraska; Tarzan, Texas; Wheelless, Oklahoma; Mud Butte, South Dakota; and Walhalla North Dakota.

I have done many things that I never would have been able to do without this job. While on a community involvement program in Rapid City, South Dakota, we got to climb up on top of Mount Rushmore and look down at the people looking

up at the carvings of four of our presidents. While in Albuquerque, New Mexico I got to fly in a hot air balloon and talk to the people on the ground as we flew over them. That was really neat.

The two Space Transportation System launches that I have attended, stand out as the really Earth shaking events, during my time with the Aerospace Education Services Program.

The daytime launch was several days of getting up early, 3 or 4 AM. and riding in a bus in stop and go traffic only to stand for hours and have an OBAPU malfunction, at T-9 minutes and counting, which scrubbed the launch. Then on the day it flew we got to see the rocket motors fire up, then hear them, and then feel them. We watched the STS leave the launch pad across the Banana river from the viewing stands. The STS jumped in to the air and then made the roll maneuver and as it streaked up range it made a terrific sight that most of Florida could see.

The nighttime launch was different in that we got to go to the pre-launch viewing of the STS sitting on the launch pad 39A the evening before the launch. Then the night of the launch we got to go to the Kennedy visitor's center and get a preview of who was on the flight and what was going to happen during the flight.

We were then bussed out to the launch-viewing area where we could see the Shuttle across the river bathed in the spotlights and view a close up of it on the monitors in front of the stands. When the clock started to count down from – 10 seconds the crowd started to chant the numbers 9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1 lift- off. When the liquid engines are lighted, and they turned the night into an artificial dawn. There was a shout of happiness and we could see and hear the engines. When the solid fuel engines were lit we could not only see and hear them but very soon we could feel them as the vibration of the sound shook the clothing on our bodies and the light from the solid fuel boosters turned the dawn's early light of the liquid engines to the stark noontime light of the solid fuel engine's glare. It was an awesome sight as the shuttle rose quickly on a tail of fire, smoke, and steam into the night's sky. As the stack passed through a small cloud and changed its color from gray to orange then back to gray, soon we watched the solid fuel boosters separate and fall towards the ocean. The light around us had dimmed and the sound faded and we were returned to the night time's darkness and quiet. But, you could see the light from the shuttle's main engines for a long, long time.

Thank you Dr. Ken Wiggins the AESP Family the OSU staff and NASA, it has been a great ride.