

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

Oklahoma State University-Stillwater, Oklahoma

The Obtainable Goal by Al Byers. Written 2001.

The Obtainable Goal
By Al Byers

I stood only 3 miles away from the shuttle launch site(the legal limit), right in front of the one of the worlds largest buildings: the vehicle assembly building (a building which could house the entire empire state building and then some within its walls). I was about to witness one of the most breathtaking thing I'd ever seen. It was 1:00 AM in the morning, and the sky was deadly calm. The only audible noise was the countdown of mission control coming through the external building speakers: "T minus 10 seconds and counting...9,8,7,...We have main engine sequence..." Then it began. The shuttle ignited, spewing forth close to 7 million pounds of combined thrust from its rocket engines. The light was so intense for 30 seconds the nighttime darkness was gone, and it appeared as if the sun was rising over the horizon, except on overdrive. It was totally daylight, with blue skies and clouds, all clearly visible to the naked eye.

The visual senses now completely flooded, it was the audible senses that would next get their adrenaline rush. The noise from the rocket engines were almost deafening, reoccurring in a pulsating manor, increasing in pitch and frequency as the shuttle lifted off the launch pad. You would think it would sound like a solid rushing stream of exhaust: khhhhhh, but the sound was rhythmically pulsating: GA, GA, GA, GA, GA. The loose clothes on my body actually moved as the sonic waves engulfed everything in its path. I could feel the pressure waves actually depress the skin on my cheeks. Then almost as suddenly as it had occurred, there was nothing but a bright light rising upward in defiance of gravity as it streaked past the other, apparently motionless, background stars. It was at that moment, I knew I had to work for NASA somehow using my teaching experience. This was the most exciting thing I had ever seen. This is where the action is! My imagination and drive were ignited observing first hand the experience of a shuttle launch.

After that experience I returned home, and began calling and writing NASA Education HQ in Washington, DC. I called Dr. Joe Martel, Larry Bilbrough, and Stanley Jones to name a few. They said they did have positions available for educators at NASA, but there were no openings at this time. They also said it would be better for me if I had my masters in education. So you know what I did. I sold my house, left my teaching position, and went back to graduate school full time. While back in school, I sent my grades to those who did the hiring at NASA. I called up people that were in the position I desired, and asked to interview them, to find out what their jobs were like. One Aerospace Education Specialists said, you may want to call Colonel Fred Gregory, a three time shuttle commander and pilot, who sometimes helps those seeking employment at NASA and education.

It was here I continued my quest, writing Colonel Gregory and stating my mission, asking for any insight he might provide. Graciously, Colonel Gregory granted my request for lunch and forwarded my previous correspondence over to the NASA Education Office in headquarters.

I returned back to school, still working on my masters, forwarding my grades at the end of each semester. Then one day I

got a phone call from another gentleman from NASA, Mr. Frank Owens. Mr. Owens asked "I hear you want to work for NASA"?, and I said "yes sir", not exactly knowing whom I was talking too. I quickly and silently scanned through all the previous NASA correspondence I had generated and still I could not place his name in the NASA hierarchy. So, I had to come clean and ask him directly, Mr. Owens where do you fit it to the NASA organization, he said "Al, all those people you said you've spoken with in the education office, they report to me." I was flabbergast, he said Colonel Gregory had forwarded my correspondence onto him directly, and he wanted to make sure I had all the proper application forms completed.

Eventually, the many late hours of studying and generating correspondence paid off, and 1 month prior to obtaining my masters, I was offered a job with Oklahoma State University working as an Aerospace Education Specialist at the Goddard Space Flight Center. I remember meeting Dr. Ken Wiggins for employment discussions at NASA's Classroom of the Future, in Wheeling, West Virginia. At the close of our discussions, with an employment offer on the table, I immediately said "yes sir, Dr. Wiggins, I can't wait to work for OSU and NASA!" Dr Wiggins looked me squarely in the eyes and said "Al, this will be the most important decision you'll ever make". In hindsight he couldn't have been more right.

Working for OSU with NASA has been absolutely the best thing that has ever happened to me in my professional career. How many other folks can say they've witnessed shuttle launches, premiere NASA briefings or experienced microgravity first hand. No job ever has, nor probably will be, as exciting as the time I have spent working for OSU at the Goddard Space Flight Center.

When I reflect back upon my time with OSU and NASA I fondly remember the friendships and encouragement of my fellow specialists exchanged during our national training meetings. I will always respect and admire the senior AESP'ers and reflect back upon them and all AESP with the fondest of memories. Luckily, I'm still associated with NASA in some degree.

I'm currently a NASA Graduate Student Research Fellow for the NASA Langley Research Center and doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech, located in Blacksburg, Virginia. Hopefully within the next 1-2 years I'll receive my Ph.D. in Instructional Technology and continue to work with OSU and NASA in some capacity.