

Around Broadneck: Discovery astronaut visits Harbour School
By WENDI WINTERS, For The Capital
Published 05/11/09



Wendi Winters — For The Capital Astronaut Richard R. "Ricky" Arnold presented Dr. Linda Jacobs, founder and executive director of Harbour School, with a school T-shirt he took into space on his mission aboard the shuttle Discovery in March. His nephew, Patrick Sood, 11, of Edgewater, attends Harbour School.

"Star Trek," the newest movie featuring the graduates of Starfleet Academy, opened Friday night to mixed reviews and long lines. The flick, set 240 years in the future, is full of exotic extraterrestrials, spaceships and spectacular scenes on faraway planets.

Last Monday, the 158 students in grades one through 12 at the Harbour School on the Broadneck Peninsula (and their eager parents) were treated to the real deal.

NASA astronaut Richard R. "Ricky" Arnold II dropped by the school to visit with the children. He had a special gift, just for them. The tall, rangy spaceman had taken a Harbour School T-shirt into outer space in March. "The technicians put it in a special place, beneath the floor of the capsule before takeoff," he explained.

He also presented the school with a Certificate of Authenticity, verifying the T-shirt had, indeed, gone where few men have gone before. He also brought along a mission crew patch, which was designed, Ricky said, by a crew member's daughter.

On this mission, Discovery traveled 202 orbits and 5.3 million miles in 12 days, 19 hours and 29 minutes. It made a picture-perfect landing on the runway at the Kennedy Space Center.

The astronaut is a Maryland native and currently calls Bowie his home. He's married and has two daughters. Since Ricky received his first degree, from Frostburg State University in 1985, he's taught science at John Hanson Middle School in Waldorf; Casablanca, Morocco; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; West Papua, Indonesia; and Bucharest, Romania. A genuine spaceman, he's been 226 miles above the earth and also lived and worked at the bottom of the world, deep below the sea at Aquarius, the world's only undersea laboratory. He was selected as a NASA mission specialist in May 2004 and underwent several years of training in preparation for this and, possibly, future missions.

From March 15 to 28 of this year, he and six others were crew members aboard the STS-119 Discovery, the 125th shuttle flight and the 36th trip for Discovery. It was also the 28th shuttle flight to the International Space Station. The mission's goal was to deliver Japanese astronaut Koichi Wakata and return with Sandra Magnus, who'd been on the space station for 134 days with two other astronauts. She was ready to go home. The shuttle also delivered the final pair of power-generating solar array wings and truss element to the station – and the visiting astronauts installed them. Unfurled, they looked like wings on a dragonfly. "They'd been sitting in a box for nine years," Ricky said matter-of-factly. At the space station, Ricky made two, nine-hour spacewalks in his bulky spacesuit.

School's murals

The Harbour School provides a warm, encouraging education to children with learning disabilities, autism, speech language impairments and other disabilities like ADD and ADHD. The school was founded by its executive director, Dr. Linda Jacobs, in 1982 with four students. In addition to the Broadneck site, near

Broadneck High School and Broadneck Library, Harbour School is also located in Owings Mills.

The past two years, Broadneck Harbour School has undergone a delightful update. The inside is completely covered with an incredible series of hand-painted murals. Dr. Jacobs and her late, great school mascot, a cocker spaniel named Puddin, are featured in several panels. The school's new mascot is Candy, who, like Puddin, is a well-dressed pooch.

Elvis and Van Gogh show up in one mural. They are painted into front row box seats that overlook the school's stage which sits in the middle of the atrium-like lobby. Superman flexes on another wall and several clowns bounce through circus scenes.

Last Monday, a large, colorful sign in the front window read: "Welcome Back Uncle Ricky."

"He's always been Ricky, not Rick, not Dick. 'Ricky' is on his flight suit and everything," said his younger sister, Kathy Sood of Edgewater. Her son, Patrick, 11, has been a student at Harbour School since second grade. Patrick has avidly followed his uncle's career trajectory, and even went to Cape Canaveral in Florida to watch the Discovery launch. The flight was delayed several times, but Patrick finally saw his uncle and crewmates soar into the night sky.

Patrick shared the spotlight on the school stage during the presentation with his uncle and Dr. Jacobs. Afterwards, the astronaut narrated a spectacular video made during the mission by various crew members. As the countdown on the launch pad reached the final moments, one excited youth yelled: "Blastoff!"

"We were doing that, too," Ricky yelled back.

Students roared with laughter as various astronauts tried to eat water in micro-gravity – it floats like a blob of clear jelly.

Interspersed with the serious work of installing and testing the new equipment and repairing older machines, the astronauts amused themselves – and their audience on earth – with various stunts in the near-weightless atmosphere, space pranks and superhero

poses. All ten astronauts straightened up on March 24, when they had a video conference with President Obama.

As the video ended, Ricky patiently fielded questions. One student was worried the crew might have taken H1N1 flu into space. "We were quarantined before we left and the doctor was checking us out. No one had the flu," Ricky reassured him.

"You guys ever fight aliens?" another student queried. "Not yet! Not yet!" came the quick reply.

Wendi Winters is a freelance writer living on the Broadneck Peninsula. If you have a story idea or news to share, please e-mail her at Wendi@QuantumStep.com.