

# Shooting for the Stars

A trip to Kennedy Space Center, and a peek aboard the shuttle *Columbia* just one month before its tragic end, teaches one South Florida group about the impact of Florida's space program and reignites in them a passion for space exploration.



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**O**n Dec. 20, 2002, a motley crew of Floridians led by Fort Lauderdale resident Ken Haiko, the Florida Space Authority's vice chairman, visited the innards of NASA/John F. Kennedy Space Center and saw areas and sights to which few civilians or even some insiders had previously been granted access.



Opposite page: Approaching the *Columbia* shuttle as it sits on the launch pad in December, ready for takeoff. A banner encourages the flight.

This page: The external tank and boosters of the *Columbia*. The orbiter is encased in a metal cage and hidden from view.







"When we walk out of this elevator, this is the walk that the astronauts walk," Wells said. "The same steps they take before getting into the shuttle."

I actually choked back tears, surprised at this emotion. Stepping out onto the open grating of the launch pad, the wind seemed to slice through our clothes. Although a visually perfect day, it seemed ice cold up here. I hugged myself to keep warm.

"After you," Wells said, extending his arm, and I realized in shock that we were being able to walk the metal bridge that crossed over to the *Columbia*.

*That bridge* that is a scene ingrained in the hearts and minds of so many. *That bridge* that so many astronauts have crossed with steeled emotions, accepting the risk they may never return. That they may never see their families or earth again, but accepting that cost for space exploration.

As I crossed *that bridge*, I forgot the cold air and only saw the coastal skyline. I looked around and took it in, breathed in the scene as if for the last time, as I imagined so many astronauts had before prior to flight. That walk was indescribable, and silence abounded on the pad.

I later described the emotion as "a feeling of no return." An overwhelming feeling of responsibility and fate, all wrapped around each other like the metal casings on the pad that snaked around and hid the *Columbia* from sight. It was a feeling that you had come this far, and you would proudly do your duty, regardless of the cost. At that moment, my respect skyrocketed for the men and women who had done this before, and for the supportive and brave families behind them.

We reached the other side of the bridge, nearly shaking, and stepped through the opening into the White Room, where the crew members receive final checks of their gear before entering the shuttle. In the White Room prior to launches are people called the Closeout Crew. Wells said these people are handpicked to be soothing and loving "last faces" for the crew of astronauts to see. The Closeout Crew follows the astronauts through their training months and become

**Opposite page: The bridge as seen from the shuttle's White Room door. This page, top: Bridge to the shuttle *Columbia*. Bottom: One of the emergency baskets that evacuates astronauts from the launch pad.**





The Florida Space Authority is the governing board that oversees Florida's space program, and its representatives have been actively trying to increase public awareness and re-infuse a passion for space into a country that has become somewhat apathetic, compared to the space program's heyday several decades ago.

What Haiko's group saw a few months ago definitely changed their appreciation of the space program, as well as the people involved in all of its aspects. They learned the history and the dangers involved in, not only space flights, but the daily activities of preparing crafts to explore the unknown.

"In the 1960s, people were so excited about the space program and everything we could accomplish," Haiko said. "They followed everything space.

We never thought we'd land on the moon and when we did, the possibilities seemed endless. But as time went on, that excitement has faded a bit. We want people to be educated on the space program and know what it is we do. How important it is. How exciting and amazing. And it really is absolutely amazing."

And after that day and everything that the group saw-- and everything that would happen just one month and 12 days later-- they whole-heartedly agreed that "all things space" are, in fact, absolutely amazing.

The group included Haiko and wife Paula; House Rep. Stacy Ritter- Dem. Coral Springs; her two children, Matt and Stephanie; Gulfstream Media Group Photographer Kristin Perez; myself and my mother, Patty Caliendo.

"You are going to get to go places today that most people will never get to go, ever," said Joel L. Wells, with the government relations office of the NASA/KSC, who served as our guide.

This group did indeed visit the guts of the space center that day, from hangars to the ground control room to a dozen other exciting nooks and crannies.

But these people, in a surprise ending to the day, also received the highest honor possible-- visiting the famous launch pad site and the orbiter that was already in place there, the space shuttle *Columbia*. It was mission STS107 and it was slated to take off on Jan. 16, 2003.

Driving up to the launch pad, we went through another series of tight security stops, drawing closer and closer to this looming monster of twisted metal that was framed by a baby blue sky and sparkling ocean.

Everyone fell silent as we approached, as the awe of what we were being allowed to do slowly sunk in. Each individual sensed the meaning of that launch pad and the missions which had successfully-- and two, the *Challenger* and *Apollo 1*, which had ended in tragedy-- started at this point.

We took an elevator to the fifth level of the steel giant.

*"Earth is the cradle of humanity,  
but one cannot live in the cradle  
forever."*

-- a quote by Konstantine Tsiolkovsky,  
on a wall of the Kennedy Space Center.



## SPACE SHUTTLE

close to them, familiar and warm faces to send them off into space.

"They are very friendly faces," Wells said. "And those are the last faces they see. When the astronauts leave the Closeout Crew, it's just the astronauts."

Then, with approval, I walked over to a looming hole, an open mouth that presented to me the innards of the shuttle *Columbia*. I touched the sides of the hatch gingerly and leaned in, awed and shocked that I was halfway inside of a space shuttle. I saw the seats mounted to the shuttle's "floor," now hanging at odd angles that would make sense once *Columbia* was no longer vertical. I saw "the John" and learned (causing Wells to blush in the process) how astronauts go to the bathroom in space.

After leaving that once-in-a-lifetime moment and crossing back over the bridge, officials pointed out the arrows painted on the ground. This was in the case of an emergency evacuation from the shuttle during a launch.

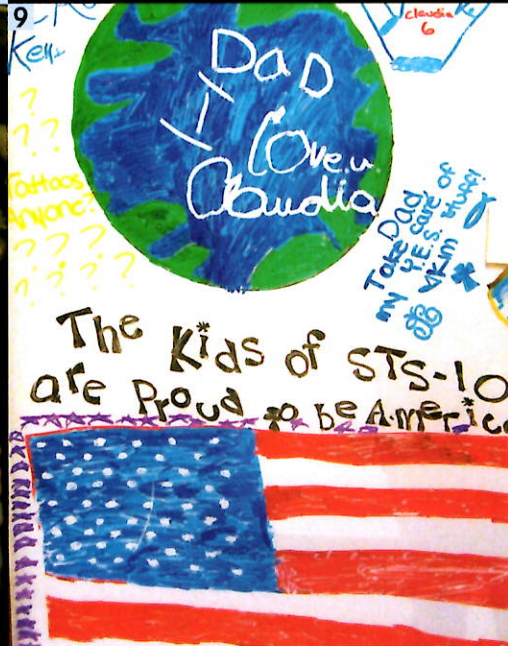
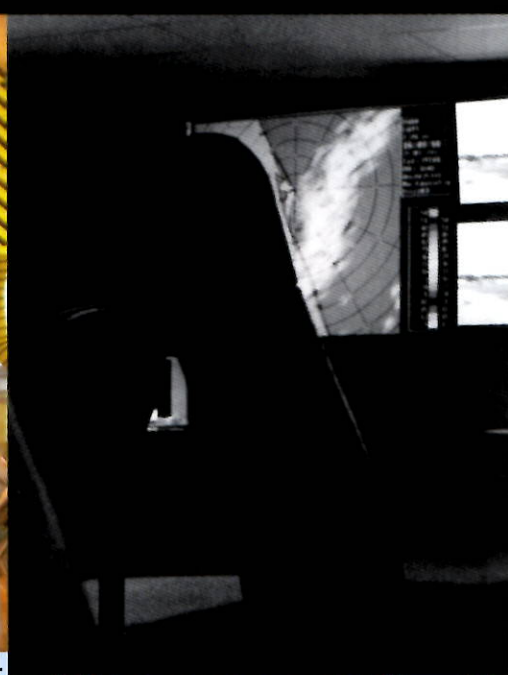
Astronauts knew to look down and the arrows lead them to contraptions that looked like large baskets attached to cables, which they would climb into and be whizzed downward into sand banks half a mile away. Nearby, there was a bunker that could keep them safe until danger passed, or an armored vehicle that could get them out if necessary.

"It's very important for us to protect them, and make sure they are okay," Wells said. "These astronauts... that's someone's mommy and daddy on that shuttle, not just someone who doesn't have a life."

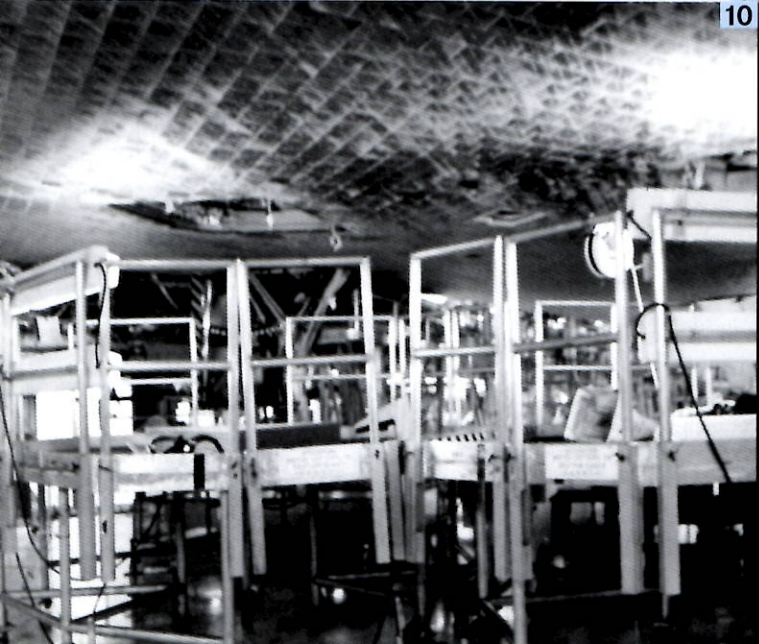
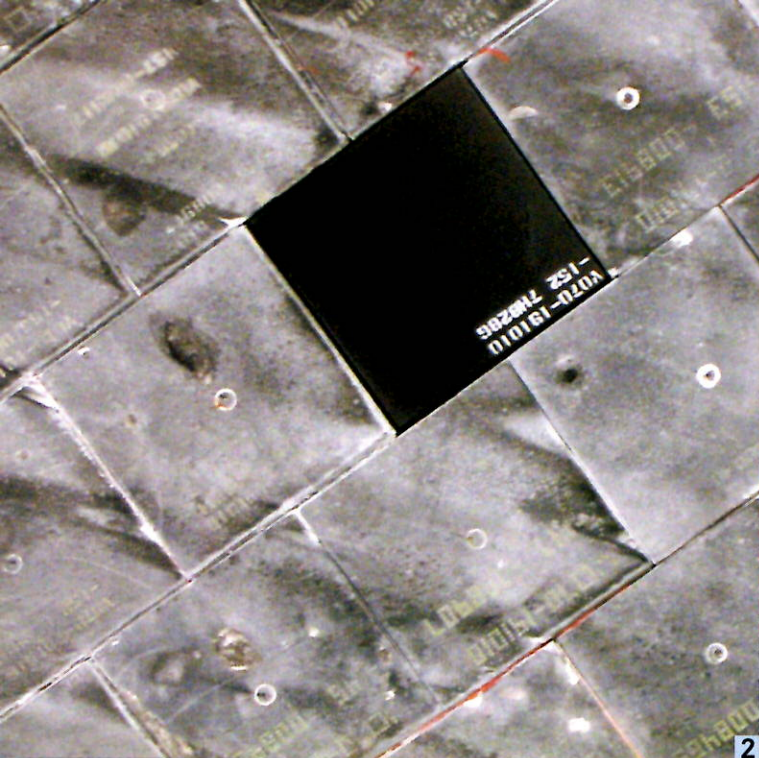
The *Columbia* looked so grand that day on the launch pad, so regal and proud. So ready. The halls of NASA were abuzz with talk of the seven astronauts who were deep in training sessions, kept far away from everyone else, preparing for this all-important mission that would host the first Israeli astronaut and several new experiments.

We learned about the intense safety measures-- from sterility to keeping places completely free of all debris-- taken every step of the way at this place, the attention to detail given to every tile placed on the shuttles.

We walked under the orbiter, *Discovery*, that was getting a complete make-over down to its bare metal as it







(1) Shadow dancing: The group at the flame trench, a deep pit beneath the shuttle where thousands of gallons of water are released during takeoff to diffuse the sound. (2) Tiles on the shuttle *Discovery*; the dark one is new. (3) The group on the launch pad. (4) National hero and one of the first astronauts on the moon, John Young, scopes the *Discovery*. (5) Space Operations Control Center, where launches and missions are monitored and controlled. (6) Joel Wells, government relations office of NASA/KSC and our guide for the day. (7) Empty cage ready to hold a shuttle during construction in the Vehicle Assembly Building, one of the largest in volume in the world. (8) A peek through *Columbia*'s door. (9) Children of the astronauts draw pictures during takeoff to calm themselves. (10) The top of this picture is the belly of the mammoth *Discovery*, which is being revamped. When underneath, it's so large you can't see the edges.