

Tucker NASA Ambassador: Space flight should continue

By Russell Tanton

DeKalb Neighbor Staff Writer

Though deeply saddened by the Columbia space shuttle accident, Ginny Mauldin-Kinney of Tucker, one of seven NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory solar system ambassadors from Georgia, says it is important to continue manned space flight.

"[The Columbia] was one of the first strictly science missions in years," Mauldin-Kinney said. "The accident was catastrophic on many levels."

"It's important to keep manned space exploration in place. You don't get the human perspective with a robot."

With astronauts on the international space station, NASA's shuttle program cannot afford to be grounded for two years as it was after the Challenger accident in 1986, she said.

A NASA-JPL solar system ambassador's job is a mix between public relations and education. Volunteers from around the country who have a keen interest in space and who are active in their communities participate in outreach programs to build enthusiasm for NASA and educate people about space missions. There are 293 ambassadors in the U.S., Puerto Rico and on an American military base in Okinawa, Japan. The program was established in 1997 during the Galileo mission.

Ambassadors participate in teleconferences with leaders of interplanetary missions, such as the Mars Exploration Rover and the Space Infrared

Telescope Facility missions, to gather information to share with the public.

"All of the ambassadors are encouraged to participate so that we can be sure we're getting proper information out to the public. We need to be very aware of what mission leaders are doing so we can effectively communicate it," Mauldin-Kinney said.

Among the activities Mauldin-Kinney has organized as an ambassador include working with the Brockett School in Tucker to send a poster with signatures from all Brockett students into space. She attended Brockett through 1979, and has a daughter who attended the school through the end of last year. An assembly will be organized at the school in early spring to honor the lives of the astronauts lost in the Columbia accident.

"We will probably have our assembly occur in April," said Tricia Sumpter, assistant principal at Brockett. "Other than the assembly, [Mauldin-Kinney] wants to do some individual class activities, probably with the upper grades – the fifth or sixth grades. We're extremely excited that we'll be able to participate."

Though exact plans for in-class activities with the upper grade level students have yet to be determined since the school is busy preparing for tests, Mauldin-Kinney said she is considering narrating multimedia presentations and video about the Mars Exploration Rover mission.

"They're in a real heavy testing time right now," she

said. "We haven't really nailed down a lot about what we're actually doing yet."

A self-described "avid space nut," Mauldin-Kinney also has been volunteering her time to the Fernbank Science Center as an observatory assistant for close to a decade. She got her start in astronomy through a continuing education program at Emory University, where she met Dr. Jim Sowell, an astronomer and research scientist at Georgia Tech. Through Dr. Sowell, she met Dr. Richard Williamson, who worked as an astronomer at Fernbank for 30 years and is now an adjunct professor at Emory. She is a former officer with the Atlanta Astronomy Club, and was an astronomy laboratory instructor for one year as an undergraduate at Georgia State University.

"[Teaching at GSU] was an honor for me because usually only graduate students do it, but because of my previous experience they asked me. It was a lot of fun," she said.

Mauldin-Kinney's uncle, Charles Mauldin, worked for NASA for more than 30 years in various roles, which included the Apollo missions as a member of the design team for the lunar rovers – then as a solid rocket booster technical representative for the space shuttle missions, telling the Navy where to pick up jettisoned rocket boosters. He also worked on the accident analysis team that examined the Challenger disaster.

"He's been an inspiration for me in terms of my interest in space and space exploration



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NASA Solar System Ambassador Ginny Mauldin-Kinney sets up her reflector telescope.

ever since I was in high school," Mauldin-Kinney said.

Charles Mauldin is retired now, but works as a consultant for the Orbital Space Plane program, which is building a reusable launch vehicle to replace the space shuttle. The OSP will be built on the space station by 2010 and ready to transport astronauts to and from the space station by 2012, NASA spokeswoman Kim Newton said.

Mauldin-Kinney was working as a waitress at an Applebee's restaurant in 1986 when one of her co-workers told her the Challenger had blown up.

"[The co-worker] said 'The shuttle just blew up,' and I was incredulous at first, then shocked and sad," she said.

"I remember thinking about my uncle, who was at Kennedy Space Flight Center at the time watching the data screen at the Solid Rocket Booster console. Seventy seconds into launch, he looked at the screen and it had no data on it. He looked up at his monitor to see Challenger lost in a fireball."

To learn more about the NASA-JPL Solar System Ambassador program visit www.jpl.nasa.gov/ambassador on the Web.

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