

Past Event: 2023 NCSBN Annual Meeting - Keynote: The Sky is Not the Limit
Video Transcript

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Event

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More info: <https://www.ncsbn.org/past-event/2023-ncsbn-annual-meeting>

Presenter

Capt. Scott Kelly, Astronaut (retired)

- [Scott] Throughout history, people have done things that are risky. Even though it is a risky thing to be doing, and I think it's a lot more risky than some people might think.

- Space is stil

something that I ever even considered, thought was possible, never even considered working at a place like NASA.

and the TV show "I Dream of Jeannie." And because I didn't do my homework, I watched a lot of television, so space was something very exciting to me and important in my life. But never, like I said, in the million years did I ever think I could do something like being an astronaut someday.

And with a little bit of my help, not much, but really with a lot of hard work, when my mom went to take that test, she got over that wall in half the time she was supposed to. Did better than a lot of the men did on this test just through her grit and hard work and became the very first female police officer in our hometown and one of the first in the entire State of New Jersey.

you might not be able to achieve. A plan to get there. And then just working really, really hard at something that is incredibly important to you.

Now, unfortunately, this did not inspire me to become a better student. And I still struggled throughout my years of school, meandered through middle school and high school. I graduated from high school in the bottom half of my class. Not proud of that. But I did go to college because all my friends were going to college and I didn't know what else to do, so I went to college.

I actually went to the wrong school, though. Now, I don't mean I went to this school over here thinking that this one was a better fit for me. What I mean is I actually applied to and showed up at this college thinking that I was going to this other one over here. I am quite possibly the first person to ever go to the wrong college.

And I get there and one of the first days, I say to my classmates, I'm like, "Hey, when's the football game?" And they're like, "Football game? We don't have a football team. That's that other school in Maryland." And I basically was doing the same thing I did in high school.

I couldn't pay attention. I wasn't doing well. Eventually, I'm not even going to class anymore, but somehow, they let me live there at that college. And one day, I'm walking through the campus, and I just happen to go into the college bookstore to buy, like, gum or something or a snack. Not a book.

I was not a big reader at the time. But I walk in there and I see this book on the end of the aisle and it's got this really cool cover and title, has red, white, it looked very patriotic. It looked like it showed, like, motion in a positive direction, which I guess I felt like I needed at that time. And I picked up the book, I read the back. I was interested enough that I took my gum money, purchased the book, went back to my dorm room, and just laid there basically for the next three days on my unmade dorm room bed, just fascinated by the stories of the fighter pilots that became the test pilots that became the original Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo astronauts.

And the book was "The Right Stuff" by Tom Wolfe. And I recognized, you know, traits that these guys had. They were all guys at the time, not anymore, of course. But at the time, they were all men. But I recognized traits that they had that I felt like I had in myself, actually. With only one exception and that is I was a bad student, and I didn't do well in school. But I actually thought and believed that if I could just fix that one thing about myself, you know, maybe I could go on and graduate from college someday, maybe as an engineering major like they all were.

Maybe I could go into the Navy and fly airplanes. Maybe if not the Navy, maybe the Air Force. It's generally easier. Some Air Force, former Air Force people here. They generally like that joke the most.

So I went back to the ship with this new attitude that I actually took out the rest of my career and life

But I went back to the ship, and I didn't do great, but I did good enough. And I wasn't the best fighter pilot at first. But eventually, I became good enough to become a test pilot, to go to test pilot school,

one day, I'm sitting in my office at the Patuxent River Naval Air Station in Maryland, where we do Navy flight test.

And my cube mate, another test pilot, had this big stack of papers. And I knew, you know, this isn't a flight test report. And I asked him, "Hey, what is that you're working on?" And he says, "This is my astronaut application." And I had not really thought about it much actually, because I didn't feel like I was qualified, I didn't have a master's degree, I didn't have a whole lot of flight test experience.

But I said to him, "When is that due?" And he says, "Tomorrow, I think." And I thought to myself, you know, this might be a good opportunity, right, taking some risk and getting rejected, because I'm not going to be able to fill out an application this big. I'm going to fill out a one-pager, I'm going to send it down to NASA, they will absolutely reject it.

But at least they'll will know, A, there's this guy out here that, you know, is interested in being an astronaut someday. And I figured maybe 10 years in the future I might have a shot at this, right? So I figured, never hear another word about it. My twin brother, Mark, who had a much different path into the Navy than I did, because when we were going into high school, all of a sudden, he started doing much better in school.

He went from below-average student to straight A's, somehow, over the summer. Never knew how that happened. And a few years ago, I said, "How'd that happen? What did you do? What was your mindset there? How did you become such a great student when we were, like, this our whole lives?" And he

So I'm like, you know, let'sw. All r

lowest-paid U.S. government employee as a volunteer test subject. But it was mostly a comparative study between Mark and I, mostly in genetics.

What they found, interesting results, 7% of my gene expression changed while I was in space as compared to my brother, Mark's. And, you know, our gene expressions change all the time, but they thought this was particularly a result of living in that environment.

Also, my telomeres and I probably don't have to explain to you guys what telomeres are, but my telomeres actually got better. And the hypothesis was they would get worse, radiation, stress, microgravity really messes with your physiology. They actually got better than my brother's did while I was in space, which is interesting results when it's completely opposite what you're expecting.

And NASA actually thought, well, maybe this is due to the very controlled diet and the exercise. And that was their conclusion. But six months after I got back, we learned that the Japanese had a telomeres experiment on the space station at the same time I was there on these little worms. And their telomeres got better too.

And I never once saw these guys working out on a treadmill, doing any type of exercise. So there's actually more to this than we thought. What we think is a certain amount of radiation is good for certain things like your telomere length. It might be bad for other things. Hopefully, I'll never find that part out.

But the best part, maybe the only good part about having an identical twin brother is the spare organs. On this flight, I had the opportunity to go outside for the first time and do the space walk. I had never done that before. And I'll tell you what, when you open the hatch and the Earth, there's 250 miles below, and you're going 17,500 miles an hour, there is nothing more important than what you're doing right now, which is basically holding on, making sure your tools don't float away, compartmentalizing as best as you possibly can, focus on what you could control, ignore everything else.

Which is really hard to do, because the Earth is spectacular looking when you're inside the spacecraft, when you're outside, order of magnitude, more impressive. Scary, though. I mean, the Earth, despite its beauty, can be scary to look at sometimes. I remember on my first flight, one of the first times I looked out the window and saw Earth, I said to one of my more experienced crewmates, I was like, "Hey, what is that film over the surface?"

And he goes, "Oh, that'

Falls in a barrel, but while you're on fire. And as soon as you realize you're not going to die, it's the most fun you've ever had in your entire life.

Had I hated flying in space for a year, I'd do it all over ag

You gotta deal with it by yourself and you can't leave. Those are the typ