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Vermonters with ties to shuttle program say goodbye

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Gail Breslauer gets up close and personal with the space shuttle Endeavour in June 2005 as it rolls by her at the NASA Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

By Jenna Pizzi

Vermont Press Bureau - Published: July 10, 2011

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On Friday morning, Gail Breslauer sat glued to the television in her Mad River Valley home to watch the space shuttle Atlantis take off. Many years before, a college-age Breslauer ran outside her New Jersey home to look at the moon after watching the broadcast of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin taking those first, historic lunar steps.

"I was looking at the moon thinking, 'There are people walking on that,'" she recalled.

While Breslauer said she always was intrigued by space exploration, she has a unique perspective on the space program, because in 1985 she was chosen from a group of 11,000 as one of 113 finalists in NASA's Teacher in Space program.

Breslauer, who was an elementary school teacher in Fayston, applied last-minute into the program; it turned out to be an experience that changed her life.

Breslauer was not chosen as the winning teacher, or even as one of the 10 finalists. When she returned to the Green Mountain State, she began the Vermont Space Education Program, going to schools to give presentations about her experience as part of the Teacher in Space program, encouraging other educators to use space exploration in the curriculum.

The Teacher in Space program ended tragically when the space shuttle carrying Christa McAuliffe of New Hampshire, the chosen teacher, and other astronauts exploded just seconds into flight.

Breslauer said the Challenger disaster was upsetting but did not deter her from wanting to become a shuttle astronaut, if she ever got the opportunity.

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The space shuttle program became such a fixture in Breslauer's life, she said last week she is sad to see it go.

"It is the end of an era," she said of Friday's launch of Atlantis, the 30-year shuttle program's final voyage.

She was one of several Vermonters with ties to the space program who spoke last week about the American space program, NASA's decision to stop the shuttles, and moving forward to the next era of exploration.

Breslauer said she hopes that just because there won't be any more space shuttles taking off from Cape Canaveral doesn't mean groups of schoolchildren won't be gathered in front of screens to watching launches, as she did when she was teaching. Breslauer said she suspects students still will be able to experience the same wonder she did as the next phase of space exploration evolves.

NASA historian Andy Chaikin said the end of the space shuttle program is far from the end of NASA. It is a welcome opportunity for the space agency to innovate and move forward in space exploration, he said.

Chaikin, an Arlington resident and author of "A Man on the Moon," said he isn't too sad to see the space shuttle go, characterizing it as "old technology that should have been on its way out 15 years ago."

"I'm actually very excited about what is coming in just the next few years," he said.

Up next for NASA is robotics that can travel to asteroids, Mars and deep space with the hopes of eventually bringing astronauts along for the ride, he said.

Chaikin said he believes the space shuttle program will be remembered as an amazing engineering accomplishment, but also tarnished by disasters and influenced by politics.

"In many ways, it didn't live up to the hopes that we had," said Chaikin.

For politicians, the shuttle program was a way to secure jobs in California and Florida, two key electoral states, said Chaikin, who said this is the only reason President Richard Nixon approved it in the first place.

Chaikin said that jobs produced by the program have been just as much of a focus as spaceflight.

The program's intention was to make spaceflight routine, therefore lowering the cost, but this never happened, said Chaikin.

Space shuttle flight could not become routine because of the high cost of flying a shuttle and the risk, as seen in the Challenger disaster. The space shuttle Columbia also is a mark on NASA's record. In 2003 the shuttle disintegrated upon re-entering the atmosphere, killing all seven astronauts inside.

Deborah Deschner Iazzo was a NASA artist during the Columbia disaster and remembers the day of the disaster with grief.

"I felt a personal connection to Columbia," said Iazzo, who lives in Middlesex. "I touched it. I walked all around it."

Iazzo lived in Florida for years when she was a NASA artist, commissioned by NASA to commemorate each space shuttle, painting it with the eye of an artist.

"They wanted artists to document each shuttle," said Iazzo, who has two paintings hanging at the Kennedy Space Center.

Iazzo said saying goodbye to the space shuttle program will be difficult, but she, too, is glad NASA will have the opportunity to devote itself to other things.

"It is a necessary parting," she said shortly before Atlantis was launched Friday.

Iazzo, Chaikin and Breslauer said that if they were given the opportunity to go on a commercial space flight sometime in the near future, they would take it without question in order to fulfill lifelong fantasies. All three said they hope whatever NASA does in the future will inspire wonder in children as it did for them.

For more information on Chaikin and his book "A Man on the Moon" visit www.andrewchaikin.com. For information about Breslauer's Vermont Space Education Program visit <http://vtpaceeducation.org>.

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