

FROM THE GRIDIRON TO THE HEAVENS: One-time footballer Melvin shares his inspiring story of becoming an astronaut with area

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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GRANITE CITY – Leland Melvin has traveled many roads in his life.

One road could have led to the National Football League. Another road did lead him to NASA.

Melvin, a former astronaut who flew on two missions on Space Shuttle Atlantis in 2008 and 2009, spoke to a gathering of students from Granite City, Madison and Venice high

schools Wednesday morning at GCHS' Performing Arts Center as part of a presentation promoting STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education in a program presented by Edwardsville's Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities.

Melvin, a native of Lynchburg, Va., was an outstanding football player for the University of Richmond in the mid-1980s, then an NCAA Division I-AA (today's Football Championship Subdivision) independent; he wound up being drafted by the Detroit Lions in the 11th round of the 1986 NFL Draft, but suffered a hamstring injury and was released. Later on, he saw time with the Dallas Cowboys and the Canadian Football League's Toronto Argonauts, both times in training camp.

Football, though, led to Melvin, who earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Richmond, to NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va., where the early planning and work for the pioneering Mercury missions in the early 1960s was performed; he later earned his MS degree in materials science engineering from Virginia in 1991 and eventually applied to become an astronaut; he was appointed to the astronaut corps in 1998 as part of the class who became known as The Penguins.

“Everyone thinks that, when you were a little kid, you saw Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walk on the moon (on the historic Apollo 11 mission in July 1969), you're 5 years old, you want to be an astronaut,” Melvin said in an interview prior to his presentation. “That wasn't the case; I wanted to be (tennis immortal) Arthur Ashe (who has ties to St. Louis, having played for Sumner High School his senior year in 1960 thanks to the efforts of Richard Hudlin and Ashe's coach in Virginia, Robert Walter Johnson). He trained in Lynchburg, but it was this moment where a friend of mine, while working at NASA, said 'Leland, you can be an astronaut'.

“I said, 'yeah, right'. He handed me the application, and I didn't fill it out. That same year, another friend of mine got in, and I said, 'wait a minute. If NASA let that knucklehead become an astronaut, maybe I can too,' so I applied and got in. I saw what he was doing – he was flying these jets and was training to fly in space – he was reaching out to inspire kids. That's something I've had a passion for, so if I can wear this blue suit to inspire and motivate others – and both my parents were middle-school teachers and I saw the impact they had on our community in Lynchburg.

“I can use the blue suit for good and to help inspire kids to maybe go into space and I have this opportunity to the students here – it's one of those things where this community has come together with the Mannie Jackson Center – when you talk about the humanities, you're talking about STEM education also – to give kids educational opportunities like I had when I was a kid when I blew up my mom's living room with a chemistry set. That activated my brain and said 'hey, I can be a scientist; I mixed the chemicals like scientists do, so I can be a scientist.'

“And that's what I think we really need to focus on, giving them these opportunities that activate their brain; it's not just filling out a bubble sheet for a test, it's doing, creating, being inspired, motivating and dreaming to see what they can do with their lives.”

Going from the football field to being a Spider to being a Cavalier to NASA and Shuttle Atlantis has been an inspiring journey for Melvin. “The journey has been very fraught with peril,” Melvin said. “A lot of things have happened that I've had to overcome starting at a very early age, but I think it's having the support of people in the community that can rally to help kids get off that negative path and go on the right track.”

Melvin's appearance at GCHS was something that had to happen, felt Ed Hightower, the Mannie Jackson Center's executive director, felt. “It's something that's very much needed,” Hightower said. “Leland Melvin has a message for every person – young, old and in-between – and that message is 'never give up,' and he talks about how he had worked and trained so hard to go up in space, how he had a setback with his hearing, and how he continued to work hard.

“He didn't shy away from the tough courses like chemistry, science, math, technology, and how, by staying true to his dream, he was ultimately able to accomplish his goal, and that's what this is all about, and that's what our kids need to hear.”

Melvin sees the future of human spaceflight as being partially private – with companies like SpaceX – and government with NASA. “The future of human spaceflight is both commercial and government,” Melvin said. “NASA has a proposed \$19.5 billion budget to maybe send people to the moon and definitely go to Mars; the new administration's budget is for Mars in 2033.”

There are still those who have opposed spaceflight in any form, despite the many achievements and developments in technology that are still being used today by people everywhere. When asked how he would respond to those who question human spaceflight today, “I would tell them that, when I go to space and look back at the planet and I'm working with people we used to fight against and we're helping to cure diseases, we're helping advance our civilization; it changes us fundamentally,” Melvin said. “The hip replacements, the smoke detectors, all the things are spinoffs from space technology are helping us on earth today.”

Melvin has written a book that will be released in May entitled “Chasing Space: An Astronaut's Story of Grit, Grace and Second Chances”, which will be available in both adult and young-reader editions. More information on the book is available on his website, lelandmelvin.com.