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Footing the bill for the final frontier

Space enthusiasts defend budget for ongoing missions

By Terry Anderson

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As the space shuttle Atlantis orbits overhead in the midst of a two-week mission to the International Space Station, a debate is going on in Congress and around the nation about the amount of money being spent on the space program.

Whether Americans will continue to support and subsidize manned space exploration could rest upon whether space flight continues to spark the inspiration that it had to previous generations.

"The space shuttle has flown for my students entire life and to many of them, it's not any sexier than airplane," said Ashwaubenon High School science teacher Brack Gillespie, an admitted space junkie. "No one really pays attention unless there's a disaster."

Boosting enthusiasm for space science is a challenge Gillespie relishes. When students wonder whether the money for space exploration is well spent, he gladly finds himself playing the devil's advocate.

"Their jaws drop when I tell my students that their handheld computers have more capacity than those that helped us go to the moon, or without the space program there would be no cordless tools," Gillespie said. "When you think about the inventions that have come from what NASA and the military produced, it's been worth the cost."

The debate on the future and costs of space exploration isn't lost on R. Aileen Yingst, a planetary geologist and instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, who also serves as the director of the Wisconsin Space Grant Consortium.

Yingst has developed a set of answers that fall into three categories:

- **Relativity:** Yes, NASA's \$16 billion budget is a lot of money, but in a country where Bill Gates was worth \$28 billion at last count, it's important to maintain perspective.
- **Priorities:** If NASA's budget went away tomorrow, what would that money then be put toward? In this country,



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Space Explorers vice president Chrissy Paape is reflected in a space-themed print at the company's location in Lawrence. Corey Wilson/Press-Gazette

Advertisement

An outer space play list

Looking for some space-themed tunes for those long summer nights spent stargazing? Give these extraterrestrial tracks a spin:

- "Space Oddity" — David Bowie
- "Major Tom (Coming Home)" — Peter Schilling
- "Looking for Astronauts" — The National
- "Rocket Man" — Elton John
- "Starship Trooper" — Yes
- "Purple People Eater" — Sheb Wooley
- "Pink Moon" — Nick Drake
- "Intergalactic" — Beastie Boys
- "Telstar" — The Tornados
- "Theme from the Black Hole" — Parliament
- "Have You Seen the Stars Tonight?" — Jefferson Starship
- "Planet Telex" — Radiohead
- "Rocket" — Smashing Pumpkins
- "Moon Rocks" — Talking Heads
- "Fly Me to the Moon" — Frank Sinatra
- "Man on the Moon" — R.E.M.
- "Flying Saucer" — Buchanan and Goodman
- "Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft" — Klaatu
- "What is the Light?" — The Flaming Lips
- "Moonchild" — Cibo Matto
- "Waiting for the UFOs" — Graham Parker

Americans spent \$16 billion on plastic surgery last year.

- Value: The implied assumption is that we should invest in something other than funding NASA. But in light of the economic return Americans receive from the space program (some estimates are \$7 for every \$1 spent), one might surmise that space exploration is a very wise, long term investment.

Certainly Jon Bodager of Ashwaubenon is hopeful that we continue to have the will and wherewithal.

The recent Ashwaubenon high school graduate, who was a student of Gillespie's, will be attending Emory University in Atlanta with the intent of becoming a doctor, and hopefully, conducting medical research for NASA.

"I remember when I was young watching the shuttle and the astronauts, and over time my parents and my teachers have encouraged the possibility of pursuing my dream," Bodager said. "Maybe I can even become a mission specialist, doing research at the International Space Station."

Northeastern Wisconsin isn't as far from Cape Canaveral as it might seem.

Gillespie is among the 4,000 teachers nationwide who are using space-based educational programs created by Space Explorers, Inc., of Lawrence.

"We help excite students about the wonders of space and science and strive to make it easier to explore careers in science math and technologies," said Chrissy Paape, vice president for the firm, which recently began its 11th year in offering space-based education programs for all grade level students.

Their programs are developed by educators and peer-reviewed by experts in space research. For example, their most recent program is based upon of the Mars Exploration Robot.

Paape's own background growing up on a farm near De Pere fueled interest in space science.

"I was majoring in agricultural education and life science communications at UW-Madison and I was interested in the possibility of growing plants in space," she said. "It's really interesting how many different subjects intertwine with space."

Space Explorers founder George French not only dreams of outer space, he envisions going there himself, in the not so distant horizon.

"Within three years people will be flying into outer space and I will be one of them," said French, who serves as president of Rocketplane, Inc. of Oklahoma City, which plans to offer suborbital flights to the public by 2009.

Ticket price: \$225,000 to \$300,000 depending on how soon passengers fly and where they sit in the spacecraft. And French believes spacecraft may launch from a spaceport in Sheboygan.

"I would say that people have always been inspired by space, going back Jules Verne," French said. "The first wave was driven by politics and government. The next wave will be international and commercial, and it will start with the replacement of the shuttle. It's going to be a huge wave."

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- "Books about UFOs" — Husker Du
 - "Girl from Mars" — Ash
 - "Hey Mr. Spaceman" — The Byrds
 - "Subway to Venus" — Red Hot Chili Peppers
 - "Space Cowboy" — Steve Miller Band
 - "Supersonic Rocket Ship" — The Kinks
 - "Love in Outer Space" — Sun Ra
- Have you got some suggestions for our extraterrestrial play list? Send your suggestions to forum@greenbaypressgazette.com