

a Young

Astronaut dreamed of space at an early age

Story by Rob Cullivan

Few Catholics from the Diocese of Rochester have attained greater heights than Lt. Col. Pamela Melroy.

Then again, few diocesan Catholics have been able to fly in space.

A U.S. Air Force veteran of the Persian Gulf War, Melroy served as pilot of the space shuttle Discovery from Oct. 11-24. The 39-year-old astronaut is a 1979 graduate of Bishop Kearney High School, Irondequoit, and a 1975 graduate of St. Louis School, Pittsford.

Melroy shared her experiences in space with students at both schools Dec. 20. At Kearney, Bishop Matthew H. Clark as well as local dignitaries were on hand for her talk.

Kearney had chosen four students to witness the launch in Florida — seniors Jeff West and Jennifer Indovina, and juniors Jonathan Griffiths and Anna Mittiga — based on their leadership skills and interest in science. Guidance counselor Kathy Volo and the school's director of marketing and public relations, Mark Ball, were chaperones.

During her visit to the schools, Melroy showed slides of her holding signs in space emblazoned with the names of her two former Catholic schools. She also showed pictures of Rochester and the Finger Lakes region that were taken from the shuttle as it orbited.

Melroy has at least one rival among her fellow diocesan Catholics in terms of heights attained. Eileen Collins, an Elmira native, was the first female to pilot a shuttle in 1995 as well as the first woman commander of a shuttle flight, in 1999. Like Collins, Melroy is one of several women astronauts who have followed in the pioneering space steps of Sally Ride. In 1983 Ride became the first U.S. woman to orbit the earth, aboard a shuttle.

It's not tremendous smarts, but tremendous determination, that made her become an astronaut, Melroy stressed to St. Louis students. She wasn't one of the top students at St. Louis in her day, she said, but nonetheless worked hard in all her classes because of a dream she had early on in life.

"It was about fifth or sixth grade when I said: 'I'm going to be an astronaut,' and I never gave up," she said.

The only rookie astronaut among the Discovery's seven-member crew, Melroy and her colleagues worked together 250 miles above the earth to attach a truss and pressurized mating adapter to the



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

biting International Space Station. The adapter now serves as a docking port for members of shuttle flights and equipment transported to the station.

In a video presentation she narrated, Melroy took her audiences step by step through her flight.

Among her comments were the following musings on space travel:

- On the shuttle launch: "It's a huge jolt, an unbelievable jolt, pushing you up in the air."
- On docking with the space station: "That was a magnificent sight, to see that beautiful station, and see the earth rolling beneath it." She pointed out that the station's colors of black and gold were exceedingly vibrant in space because there is no atmosphere distorting them.
- On sleeping in the shuttle: "Living in space is a lot like going on a camping trip. There's all these people in mummy (sleeping) bags. They hung upside down like bats."
- On living in zero gravity: "You feel like a ballerina, and you just float everywhere."
- On returning to earth: "After two weeks in zero gravity, it felt like I weighed a million pounds."

Much of the time, the video presentation felt more like watching a humorous home movie with Melroy the family member come home, than listening to an Air Force officer narrate an official NASA documentary. For example, portions of the video showed Melroy's crew members playing baseball with

peanuts and almonds as the "ball" and with a hammer as the "bat," or catching bits of food in their mouths as the food bits floated through the weightless shuttle world like fish swimming in water. Indeed, Melroy's mood was like that of a little girl overcome with joy and wonder on Christmas morning as she talked about what it was like to see the earth from space.

"There were so many special moments for me in space," she said. "I always thought of God."

She pointed out that when the world is lit by the sun, from space, it's as though there were no human beings on it.

"During the day, the earth is all about nature with huge mountains and glaciers. It's hard to see the cities."

At night, it's a different story, she said. "You can see the lights of the cities at night," she said. In a reflective tone she added, "Every one of those (lights) represents a human, the wonderful minds and hearts of human beings."

Melroy spent a year preparing for her mission, and said she would like to go back to space some day. She added that the United States may send a manned mission to Mars in the next quarter century, but that she will be too old to go. At best, she might have a shot at going to the moon should the United States decide to return there, she said, noting it may happen in five to 10 years.

She added in an interview following her St. Louis presentation that the shuttle flight didn't change her Catholic beliefs, but it did intensify them. For example,

she noted that the scientific world is divided between those who believe there's no evidence for the existence of a supreme being and those who see the proof everywhere in nature's intricate design. She left no doubt as to which camp she belonged.

"He's an artist and an engineer without compare ...," she said of God. "You have to be in awe. You just do."

Events

Unless otherwise indicated, for information on the following events, call the hotline for Odyssey, the diocesan-sponsored young adults network, at 716/328-3228, ext 375, or 1/800-388-7177.

• **Saturday, Feb. 3:** Fourth Annual Odyssey Blizzard Bash, 2 p.m., Hopkins Point Lodge, Mendon Ponds Park. Cost is \$10 for cabin rental and dinner. Bring a beverage, snack or dessert to share. Reservations needed by Tues., Jan. 30, but you can pay at the park. RSVP on the Odyssey hotline.

• **Sunday, Feb. 11:** Mass at St. John of Rochester, 8 Wickford Way, Fairport, 9 a.m. Brunch afterwards at local restaurant. RSVP on the Odyssey hotline.

• **Saturday, Feb. 17:** Ice skating at the Rochester Institute of Technology off Jefferson Road in Henrietta, from 2:30-4:30 p.m. Cost is \$5. Free skates available. Dinner afterward at a local restaurant. RSVP on the Odyssey hotline.

• **Wednesday, Feb. 21:** Catholic Coffeehouse in Haffey Hall at St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Ave., Rochester, 7:30-9:30 p.m. Topic: "Catholic Social Justice." Call Nora Bradbury-Haehl at 716/328-3210, ext. 218.

• **Saturday, Feb. 24:** Game Night at St. Thomas More Church, 2617 East Ave., Brighton, 7-11 p.m. Bring a snack to share and your favorite board game.

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