

Columbia Elementary School is dedicated to future learners and leaders

By Cheerie R. Patneude
White Sands Test Facility

Students at the new Columbia Elementary School in Las Cruces, N.M., had a blast on Sept. 18 when they made colorful paper rockets and launched them from the playground.

"I thought it would fly only a short distance," fourth-grader Miles Romney said, "but it went farther than I thought it would go!"

The rockets were launched just one day before the school's official dedication to the memory of the Space Shuttle *Columbia* and her crew. For the dedication, the school's large multipurpose room was filled with the entire student body, parents, guests and staff who enjoyed the Vista Middle School Handbell Choir's performance of "Celebrate *Columbia*." The audience also stood at attention for the Mayfield High School Junior ROTC Color Guard and the Mayfield Madrigal Singers.

Keynote speaker Astronaut James Reilly was greeted by flag-waving students as he was introduced. Reilly spoke to the audience of his memories and close friendship with the STS-107 crew. In one anecdote, Reilly told of how his friend and colleague Astronaut Michael Anderson was often told that he couldn't become a pilot. But then he spoke of Anderson's faith in himself, his hard work pursuing his goal and refusal to listen to his critics.

"Lots of people will tell you that you can't do something. But the only person that can tell you that you can't do something is you," Reilly said. "My friend Mike refused to listen to those others and went on to become an outstanding pilot."

Reilly felt that naming the school in memory of his friends "will leave a legacy that will live on in the students that will come behind you."

Reilly then presented the school with a framed collage of photos of the STS-107 astronauts.

Jennifer Terrazas, Principal of Columbia Middle School, introduced dignitaries from the Las Cruces School Board, Las Cruces Public School employees, Columbia Elementary staff members, family members and NASA White Sands Test Facility (WSTF) personnel.

Stephen Nunez, NASA WSTF Manager, presented the school with a framed, signed photo of the STS-107 crew with a commemorative mission patch and coin.

A grove of seven red oaks has been planted in the front of the school, one for each astronaut. The grove is a memorial to the STS-107 crew to be forever remembered by the students in the spirit of learning and exploring.

Several larger-than-life photographs of NASA explorers hang in the halls of the new school. Each wing of classrooms has a different theme: Apollo, Space Shuttle, International Space Station and Future Exploration. The students of Columbia are considered "Explorers."

Pleddie Baker, the WSTF Education Outreach leader who assisted in coordinating the event, said, "We are honoring the crew of *Columbia*, which was tragically lost last February. But we are also honoring a new beginning: the opening of a new elementary school and the education of our children it represents. It is NASA's hope that, by using space to inspire children to get a good education, they will also go farther and fly higher throughout their life – much like their rockets."

He added: "It is volunteers like those we have from the White Sands Test Facility, and the excellent teaching staff you have at Columbia, who believe that this not only can happen, but definitely will happen by creating these opportunities for the students."

Sonja Vestal, a Columbia Elementary teacher and the school's Science Advisor Coordinator, said, "It is an honor to be a part of Columbia Elementary School. We're truly grateful that NASA is willing to show us the pathway to a better science and technology education for our students."



Columbia Elementary School in Las Cruces, N.M., was officially dedicated to the Shuttle and crew on Sept. 19.

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Photo by Randy Page



Astronaut James Reilly meets some of the Columbia Elementary students.

wstf0903e4049 (above)
wstf0903e4013 Photos by Randy Page

