

All-minority CATO team indicative of JSC's increasing diversity

Indicative of JSC's increasingly diverse workforce, more and more minorities are serving in key mission support positions. Recently, during International Space Station Assembly Flight 3A, the entire Communications and Tracking Officer (CATO) team was comprised of Hispanic or African-American individuals. The team included CATOs Ana Lopez (Mission Lead), Terry Hudson, and James Keeton, and Station RF Communications Officers (STARCOM) Lee Harvey, Jorge Salazar and Roger Gomez.

"As far as the job goes, this mission was no different than any other but there was a deeper sense of satisfaction because we [minorities] are getting these opportunities now," said Terry Hudson, communications and tracking officer. "For us, it's giving us a chance to show that we can do the work. Minorities are growing, succeeding and being recognized."

According to Frank Markle, Station Communication and Tracking Systems Group lead, this hardworking team represents a milestone for the center and reflects the changing face of NASA.

"They are very dedicated and really helped to bring this flight off," said Markle. "All-minority teams, such as this one, show the growth we've made as a center in diversity. They've all come from a lot of different areas and bring a lot to our work."

As diverse as their ethnicity, however, are their paths to working in the space program. The six represent a dynamic mix of backgrounds, from pro football to the military, leading them to work with NASA.



Photograph by Bill Stafford

A longtime interest in aviation, including a previous job as an air traffic controller, led Jorge Salazar to his current role with the CATO team.

Jorge Salazar

A native of the Houston area, Hispanic-American Salazar graduated from Furr High School in 1987. Having always liked aviation, he joined the Navy and began training as a military air traffic controller. After completing his tour, he turned his training into a profession as a controller at nearby Hobby Airport. After six years of civilian flight control, he turned his talents to the space industry and joined JSC. Now three years later, he still thrives on the pressure cooker atmosphere that comes with his job.

"I knew working at NASA would be exciting and there are a lot of similarities to my Navy experience," said Salazar. "The time-critical decision-making I had as an air traffic controller was valuable. We see this often while working space shuttle missions."



Photograph by Bill Stafford

"I've had friends from other teams outside of my group say 'I wish my team were more like yours.' I think that's a good reflection on NASA."

Lee Harvey

Fellow CATO Harvey also has a military background, but maybe more surprising is his time as a professional football player with the New Orleans Saints.

"I never thought I'd be working here," said Harvey. "But I love it. It's boundless and infinite. And it was an honor to be working on that flight. I cut my teeth on 3A—it was a lot of hard work but it was an outstanding experience."

Harvey grew up in east St. Louis, Ill. After high school, he joined the U.S. Army where he earned numerous awards and commendations for his participation in conflicts such as Operations Just Cause, Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

He went on to Texas Southern University to earn an electrical engineering degree and was picked up by the Saints. His professional football career was unexpectedly shortened due to a serious neck and shoulder injury. He said the transition to a technical job was an adjustment but one he's glad he made.

"I feel a real sense of pride and esteem from being a part of the nation's space program," said Harvey. "And I feel the senior level managers like what the military background brings to the organization—not just with myself but with everyone here at NASA who has served our country. I think what I've learned in the various military leadership schools has been valuable—stay positive, accept the challenges, move on and complete the mission."



Photograph by Bill Stafford

"It's always nice to know that other people with possibly similar backgrounds have similar accomplishments."

Ana Lopez

Strong encouragement from her parents and teachers led Lopez to excel as she pursued math and science as a young student. Lopez's mother was raised in Monterey, Mexico, but moved to Texas and made San Antonio her new home. According to Lopez, it was her mother who inspired her to achieve more.

"She always stressed education," said Lopez. "I went with her several times back to Mexico and I've seen how hard some of my relatives have to work. I also noticed that they did not have the same

educational opportunities that were available to me. I knew that I had to take advantage of these opportunities and get an education."

Always interested in math and science, Lopez enrolled in a pre-freshman engineering program in middle school. A high school ROTC mentor guided her toward engineering.

"When I learned about engineering, I liked every part of it—design, research and operations," said Lopez. "My mentor is the one who showed me how to work hard and stay motivated."

Now she is reaping the rewards of her hard work and diligence. As a 1996 electrical engineering graduate of the University of Texas at San Antonio, Lopez joined United Space Alliance on the Instrumentation and Communications System team before transitioning to a civil servant position on the CATO team.

"It's nice to see how diverse our team is," says Lopez. "Hopefully we can set an example or possibly inspire others that might be currently aiming toward similar accomplishments. Anything is possible. You just need to work hard."



Photograph by Bill Stafford

"The opportunities are out there if you are willing to strive to get them."

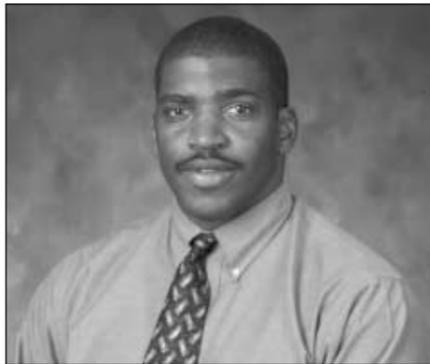
Roger Gomez

El Paso native Gomez is described as the quiet one in the group, but considered very knowledgeable. He claims he was always interested in electrical engineering but was amazed that he made it to the NASA ranks.

"I considered myself lucky to get an interview," says Gomez of his chance to join the space program in 1996. According to Gomez, when he joined the CATO team, there were only three or four minorities in his group but now nearly half of the 28-person team are minorities.

"It means that there is a big change happening," said Gomez. "It proves that the government is hiring minorities and there are opportunities for everyone."

"That's an important message," says Gomez, who shares that message with his community and the younger generation in his hometown.



Photograph by Bill Stafford

"My background played a part in helping me learn to meet challenges and work as a team."

Terry Hudson

Hudson, a native of Houston, pursued a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Southern University.

After graduating, he was employed with the Department of Energy—Rocky Flats Site located in Golden, Co. While there, he received a master's degree in environmental engineering from the University of Colorado.

"I loved it," said Hudson. "It entailed a lot of responsibility and work with hazardous materials."

After five years of employment with the DOE, Hudson went to work for Boeing Helicopter in Pennsylvania as an environmental engineer, before joining the CATO team.



Photograph by Bill Stafford

The decision to go to college did more than set a career path for James Keeton. Quite possibly, it saved his life.

James Keeton

For some, the impact of the decision to pursue higher education might not be clearer than it is for Keeton.

As a young boy growing up in Texarkana, Keeton recalls looking up into the night sky full of wonder and amazement. Little did he know his intrigue with space would eventually lead him to a job in the world's most renowned space agency and that his single decision to go to college might have actually saved his life.

"My dad didn't ask—he told me I was going to go to college that summer," said Keeton. "Shortly after I left for college, one of my high school friends was shot. That decision to leave to go to school probably saved my life."

Keeton received an electrical engineering degree in 1996 from Prairie View A&M and went on to join United Space Alliance, Flight 3A being his fourth mission. Because he has seen the impact higher education had on his life, Keeton remains committed to sharing the message with students in his hometown.

"I feel very good about what I've accomplished," said Keeton. "Whenever I am at home, I talk with the students at my high school and tell them my story of success and how they can succeed. Anyone can do it, with God and if you put your mind to it."

The Team

This CATO team represents a kaleidoscope of cultures and backgrounds combined to produce an effective flight operations team. According to the group's members, by broadening our perspective and opening our doors to new ways of thinking, we all benefit and reap the rewards of diversity.

"We were very pleased with this team's success on 3A," Markle said. "And it reinforced our decision to give them critical leadership positions on the next assembly missions."