

NASA Astronaut Col. Rex Walheim tells delegates of “Same Summit, Different Path”

Rex J. Walheim’s path to becoming an astronaut included a diagnosed heart murmur, some isolated days at a North Dakota radar site and hearing the word “no” a few times. “If a goal is worth having, it’s worth trying hard for” is how he approached these and other challenges to become a mission specialist on the STS-110 Atlantis and STS-122 Atlantis flights to the International Space Station.

Walheim told delegates how his career plans almost derailed several times. He did not become a pilot because of a diagnosed heart murmur. Before he became a flight test engineer, he paid his dues doing “the best job I could” for the Air Force at a small radar site, and he was not accepted the first time he applied to be a flight test engineer or the first time he applied to be an astronaut candidate.

But Walheim showed how his skills and dedication earned him a most spectacular opportunity when he made his video presentation of his experiences on the space shuttle and International Space Station. He showed delegates the powered 8 ½ minute flight into orbit, the views of earth while traveling at 17,500 mph, and his thrilling spacewalks.

Seeing Walheim hanging on the end of a robot arm with heels clipped into foot restraints was a WOW moment of the evening. While showing a photo of himself virtually hanging in space working on a module while traveling around the world every 90 minutes, Walheim described the amazing views. “You can see Hawaii, the California coast, the Grand Canyon and the Egyptian Pyramids.”

Along with some of the most riveting and extensive video of life inside the space shuttle ever seen during a Boys’ State presentation, he shared some staggering facts with the audience. Temperatures in space can vary from 150 above zero to 100 below. Each spacewalk suit costs about \$12 million. And each astronaut was paid the standard military rate for incidentals each day while traveling, \$2.

Walheim took questions from the audience, including the expected “How do you use the bathroom in space?” which brought giggles and a colorful answer (think shopvac).

“The greatest benefit of space travel is the explorers’ tradition. Countries that keep that tradition continue to succeed. Other countries will do this if we don’t. The technological base will not advance without it.”

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