



Astronaut helps unveil meteorite exhibit

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As part of the first joint U.S.-Russian space mission, astronaut Ken Reightler knows the importance of working together to discover what lies in our universe.

Back on Earth, he understands the importance of sharing what he's learned. Now with Lockheed Martin Space Operations, Reightler traveled to the Challenger Center for Science and Technology on Tuesday night as a guest speaker, and to help unveil the center's new meteorite exhibit.

The exhibit, which opens this week for perusal by school students traveling on mock space missions, soon will be open to the public.

Surrounded by a model space shuttle and decorative stars dangling from the ceiling, Reightler told of his first mission in 1991, Space Transportation System 48, which focused on studying the Earth's atmosphere. In 1994, he traveled with the cosmonauts on the STS 60 mission that explored the Wake Shield Facility, or working in a vacuum without atmosphere, Reightler explained.

The mission studied how back on Earth we might use a vacuum in science. For example, he explained, computer chips are produced in a vacuum.

Aside from scientific findings, working cooperatively and learning alongside Russian cosmonauts joined the two countries for future space cooperation.

"How do you bridge all the gaps we had from the Cold War days?" he said, adding that he remained close friends with one of the cosmonauts.

With a contract from NASA to build a "crew exploration vehicle," Reightler said, his company plans to have the vehicle ready to travel to the International Space Station by 2014 and to the moon by 2020. There still is a vast amount unknown about the universe, he said.

"Just a few years ago, we really didn't even have any proof that there were other solar systems in our universe," he said.

Now, he said, there is proof of more than 300.

The opening of the new meteorite exhibit hopefully will help people understand a little more about space, said Paul Sipiera, with the International Planetary Studies Foundation that provided the exhibit.

"We're trying to show a complete picture of how meteorites affect the Earth," Sipiera said. "Meteorites are the bricks and mortar of planets."

Throughout history, Szipiera said, life nearly has gone extinct at various times, all because of "major meteorite impact."

Meteorite specimens, including a large meteorite found in South Africa – available for touching – are on display in the exhibit. Photos of astronauts also are displayed.

"It is a tribute to space science and our astronauts," Szipiera said of the exhibit.

By Lee Ann Gill