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relishes view, experiences from outer space**

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Snowy sleet coated the ground, but a group of more than 100 Liberal residents and students turned out to hear astronaut and U.S. Army Col. Jeff Williams speak Wednesday evening. Williams, who joked that he'd packed a winter coat after checking the weather forecast, presented an overview of his experiences as a NASA astronaut at the International Space Station. He also emphasized the continuing work of NASA, despite the shutdown of the shuttle program. “We have not shut our doors. NASA is not out of business,” Williams said. With the International Space Station slated to continue operations at least until 2020, the agency continues to send men and women into space, via the Russian Soyuz rockets.

Having enlisted and served in the U.S. military at the height of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, Williams said collaboration with Russian astronauts required a mental adjustment on his part. “I’m still overwhelmed with the irony of it, Williams told the audience. “We’re working with those who used to be our enemies — Russia, Japan, which we fought in WWII. This is a much better arrangement.” Williams has traveled to space twice and worked with more than 40 fellow astronauts from partner countries. The first time, he traveled to the ISS in the Space Shuttle. For his second trip, he traveled in a Russian rocket. Showing video footage of that five-month time in space, Williams narrated the scenes and explained the work of international astronauts, from rehydrating and consuming packets of food in a zero-gravity environment — “crackers don’t do so well,” he noted — to science experiments and ISS maintenance. An avid photographer, Williams enjoyed taking photographs of various parts of Earth from the cupola portion of the ISS, which allows a complete view of the planet through a window-covered enclosure. The station circles the Earth every 90 minutes, so Williams’ photos displayed a vast array of scenery observed from space: glaciers from Patagonia, the Grand Canyon, coral reefs “that look like watercolor paintings,” and scenes from Australia “which looks like a completely different planet,” he said.

During the question-and-answer portion of the program, Williams was peppered with questions from people of all ages. Audience members old enough to remember the beginning of the American space program and the first missions to the moon wanted to know about NASA’s

future, and Williams' personal opinion about the U.S. space program.

Williams, who has no current plans to retire, was reticent about the decision to retire the shuttle.

"Perhaps it was logical," he said, adding that the shuttle "is a magnificent machine," perfectly suited for helping set up and maintain an International Space Station. Williams reviewed the history of the space program, starting with the first moon mission "which was very symbolic and changed the order of things" in world politics. He noted that the shuttle's development was directly tied to the U.S. government's long-term goal of further visits to the moon and eventually Mars.

Funding battles, he said, are the main cause of hitches in the space program.

NASA "does not have its own budget," he said. "We really do operate at the whim of those in the government. It's hard to execute a 10- to 15-year plan when you have to fight over the budget every single year. My personal opinion is that the ISS would not have occurred without (partnership) with the Russians."

Though it's not always easy to work with people who operate in a different system with a different culture and a different language, Williams said the Russian astronauts and scientists were "great team members and partners" in the ISS project.

After a day of meetings with local educators and appearance at Liberal's two intermediate schools, Williams still wanted to talk education. When a student asked "how long he'd been doing this," his answer focused on how he became an astronaut.

"It took 10 years of applying and six applications," he said. "I interviewed three times. When you have goals in life, sometimes those goals shift, and sometimes you have to keep at it."

Williams' advice to students of all ages is "don't give up. If you want to be an astronaut, the worst thing you can do is not apply. It takes hard work — whatever we do. That's where we earn our way," he said.

Williams' visit to Liberal was a collaborative project of USD No. 480, Seward County Community College-Area Technical School and the City of Liberal.

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