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By Shelby Perea / Journal Staff Writer

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A few well-prepared Albuquerque Public Schools students got to ask questions of an astronaut aboard the International Space Station as it flew through the Albuquerque sky Thursday morning. Students from Valley High, Mission Avenue Elementary School and Chaparral Elementary School participated in the event. Pictured is eight year-old Abbi Downing gets off the podium after asking her question as Bob Gilbert steadies the microphone.

Apart from a few excited whispers, the Valley High School Performing Arts Center went silent at 10:26 a.m. Thursday despite the rows and rows of students.

Then radio static crackled, breaking the silence.

The sound of a radio operator quickly followed: “How do you read? Over.”

On the other end of that signal was astronaut Dr. Serena Auñón-Chancellor.

The conversation wasn't unlike a long-distance phone call, albeit a bit fuzzy at times. That's because Auñón-Chancellor was quite a distance away, establishing contact while flying aboard the International Space Station.

She answered about 15 questions from Valley High School, Mission Avenue and Chaparral Elementary School students that ranged from how well she sleeps in space – she sleeps very well in space, by the way – to the most hazardous parts of the travel.



Dr. Serena Auñón-Chancellor was aboard the International Space Station when she talked with APS students.

As an 8-year-old, Auñón-Chancellor would watch shuttle launches and dream about being an astronaut, she reminisced aloud to the kids.

Still, her work comes with challenges.

During the interview, she talked about the toxic chemicals astronauts have to be aware of when traveling and told the kids about the many years of training she went through.

The hardest part of the job? Being away from her family for long periods of time, she said.

“It was great talking,” she said cheerily just before signing off.

It was a short call, roughly 10 minutes, but it took over a year to orchestrate.



The Valley High School Performing Arts Center was filled with students Thursday morning as a conversation with astronaut Dr. Serena Auñón-Chancellor was streamed live. Valley was chosen for the opportunity among nearly 1,000 applicants worldwide. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

Alma Ripley, Chaparral assistant principal, told the Journal that students began working on an application for the opportunity in September 2017. From nearly 1,000 worldwide applicants, Valley High was one of a dozen schools selected for the Amateur Radio on the International Space Station program.

Setting up the radio at the school took six weeks itself, an effort coordinated by the High Desert Amateur Radio Club of Albuquerque.

Valley High is no stranger to the process, though, having hosted the same event before in 2016 to talk with NASA astronaut Jeff Williams.

On Thursday, Auñón-Chancellor wasn't the only astronaut the kids got to hear from.



Mike Mullane, a veteran of three space shuttle missions, shared with the audience how he dreamed of becoming an astronaut when he was younger and the tenacity it took to get there

Mike Mullane, a veteran of three space shuttle missions and who grew up in Albuquerque, took to the stage and told of his travels, too.

The St. Pius X High School alumnus talked about being a child during the space race and his love and curiosity for all things aviatric and celestial.

He detailed the step-by-step process of a space journey and described the surreal feeling of looking out the window of the aircraft, seeing Albuquerque from the sky when so often as a child he would stand on the desert ground, looking up into space.

Albuquerque Public Schools Superintendent Raquel Reedy applauded the Valley Air Force JROTC STEM program, the district's K-12 STEM Initiative and the other team members that made the event happen.

“When I was a young girl, the idea of talking to astronauts was the stuff of science fiction,” she said.

Contact Details

Contact Date: 10/19/2018

ISS Station: NA1SS

VHS Station: NM5HD

AOS Time: 16:27:03 UTC 10:27:03 MST

LOS Time: 16:37:27 UTC 10:37:27 MST

Downlink: 145.800 MHz