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Former NFL player, NASA astronaut encourages dreamers at Granite City High

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GRANITE CITY — From football to space travel, one dreamer shared his story with area high school students Wednesday on reaching for the stars despite life’s challenges.

Hundreds of students from Granite City, Madison and Venice high schools filled the Granite City High Auditorium, 3101 Madison Ave., and listened as one man shared life lessons he experienced both on earth and in outer space. Former NFL player turned NASA Astronaut Leland Melvin delivered “The Right Stuff is the Never Give Up Stuff” presentation Wednesday morning highlighting the importance of persevering, despite failures life may deliver and provided knowledge on his science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) career path.

“The power of chemistry changed my life,” said Melvin. Melvin’s roughly hour-long speech encouraged students to pursue their dreams.

From the auditorium's stage, Melvin explained how he took to scientific learning at a young age. Melvin explained how he first delved into science and engineering by conducting experiences with his first chemistry set, learned through hands-on activities with his family one summer and even constructed his own skateboard.

Melvin said he drew on cultural influences while growing up, including Star Trek's Nichelle Nichols for her trailblazing work as an African-American female television star and famous tennis player Arthur Ashe.

Melvin went on describing his time as a high school football player, where he was noticed by a college scout and was eventually drafted by the Detroit Lions, where he pulled a hamstring in training camp and went on to sustain the same injury while playing for the Dallas Cowboys.

Despite the setback, Melvin said how fortunate he was to be able to fall back on his education. Melvin went on to apply for a position at NASA and stepped into a role at Langley Research Center in Virginia. While back on his feet training with NASA, Melvin suffered a severe injury that left him partially deaf in one ear. With much support and handwork, Melvin propelled himself to space travel aboard the International Space Station on the STS-122 Atlantis in 2008 and on the on the STS-129 in 2009.

Melvin spent the remainder of the presentation highlighting life on the space shuttle, sharing videos, photographs and stories illustrating the bond created while spending months with different astronauts from various countries. The event was sponsored by Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities and Madison County Regional Office of Education, both of out Edwardsville.

Melvin explained the significance humanities has in tethering a variety of academic studies together and how his parents, both being middle school teachers, helped fuel his desire to reach out to young learners.

"When we talk about humanities we are talking about STEM as well," said Melvin. "I want to give kids the hands-on experience and opportunities that I had when I was a kid like when I blew up my mother's living room with a chemistry set. That is what we need to focus on, giving the kids here today the opportunities to do, create, inspire and dream."

Mannie Jackson Center Executive Director Ed Hightower spoke about Melvin's opportunity to impact area students' future.

"It means so much to the young people to have astronaut Leland Melvin here to let them know it is okay to fail but get yourself up and learn from those mistakes. Its OK to take challenging courses in school, keep working, keep your eye on the ball and ultimately if you stay true to yourself you can achieve goals you have in life," said Hightower.

"To be able to kick off our STEM initiative is just very gratifying and to do it here at Granite City, Madison and Venice. The next step will be in Alton, then moving back to the center of Madison County. The goal is to establish the craft center next to the Mannie Jackson Center as our STEM hub in relationship with SIUE."

Hightower said the initiative involves organizing engaging activities for students grades K-12. The initiative falls in line with the ongoing efforts regarding the “Conversation Toward a Brighter Future.”

The youth-driven program works to uncover issues and design plans yielding positive results reflecting Mannie Jackson Center for Humanities’ four pillars: Respect, Dignity, Understanding and Forgiveness.

Regional Superintendent of Schools for Madison County Bob Daiber spoke following the presentation Wednesday.

“It’s events like this where kids are inspired. Where their dreams can become real because they see someone who has lived their own dream. I think it also brings a reality to children,” said Daiber. “That’s what today is all about. Bringing kids together to meet people who have been highly successful in our world.”

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