Buzz Aldrin

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KIDSDAY REPORTERS

We spoke with astronaut and space pioneer Buzz Aldrin, one of the first two humans who made the historic Apollo 11 moon walk on July 20, 1969. He was at an event in Manhattan to celebrate the 50th anniversary of General Electric's Lexan, a very strong plastic used to make everything from space helmets to cell phones. At the event, held a few days before the space shuttle Columbia tragedy, we watched a chemistry show and saw one of the space suits Aldrin used in training. His space suits weighed about 360 pounds on Earth, but only 60 pounds on the moon, because the moon's gravity is about one-sixth of that on Earth.

Aldrin said he couldn't imagine when growing up in New Jersey that he would one day walk on the moon. He was educated at West Point and flew jet fighters during the Korean War. He earned a doctorate in astronautics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before being chosen as an astronaut by NASA in 1963. He has logged more than 4,500 of flying time, 290 of which were in space.

Q. What inspired you to be an astronaut?

A. While I was studying things about space at MIT, it got me thinking that I could be part of the space program because of things I had done and because of who were being selected.

Q. Did you celebrate when you were chosen to be part of the Apollo 11 space mission?

A. You don't celebrate until something is finished. Being chosen was just the beginning. You're relieved to have been chosen, but then you have to move on. But everything was a celebration.

Q. Are you friends with other astronauts?

A. Yes, we're all friends, but we're all over the place. There were 24 of us who reached the moon, and 18 are still living now. I'm trying to organize a space conference for us in December in Washington, D.C.

Q. We've read that even today, you are committed to continuing interest in future space travel. For example, you've created the concept of the Cycler, a spacecraft system which makes orbits between Earth and Mars, and you received a U.S. patent in 1993 for a permanent space station you designed. Can you tell us about the Cycler?

A. I've always been challenged by trying to do things better than other people have done. It seemed that a better strategy from going to the Earth to the moon would be the Cycler. Then the challenge was trying to think of one that would be able to go to Mars. It has to be corrected a little bit, but I think it will one day be able to transport you to Mars.

Q. What about using different types of energy to travel in space?

A. We have been using different fuels for different reasons. Some are more combustible than others, so they ignite faster and move rockets faster. One day we will be able to use nuclear rockets or laser beams. There will be a lot of new things that will come along.

Q. Today's event has us thinking about how many things are made of plastic. What do you think is the greatest plastic invention?

A. There are so many of them. Lexan came along at the right time when we needed something that was shock-resistant [for use in space missions]. My space helmet was made of plastic, and that was a good invention.

Q. Do any of your children or grandchildren want to follow in your footsteps?

A. My younger son is working with Boeing and planning for future activities.

Q. What advice do you have for kids if they want to follow in your footsteps?

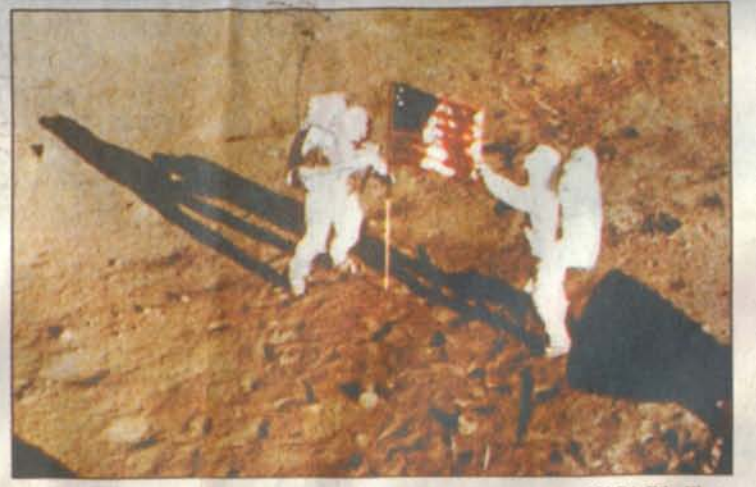
A. You have to listen to your teachers and study hard. And be curious.

Q. You've had a lot of accomplishments in your life. What are you most proud of?

A. For not making mistakes and for writing wonderful science fiction stories ["Encounter with Tiber" in 1996, Warner Books; and "The Return" in 2000, Forge Books] that make people think.

It's always good to challenge people to think and use their imaginations.

Read more about Aldrin by visiting the Web site www.buzzaldrin.com.



NASA File Photo

Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walk on the moon in July 1969.

Kidsday reporters Natalie Lopatowski, Veronica Valliancourt and Karissa Broderick-Beck with Buzz Aldrin