



## A Short History of the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation and its Scholarship Program

Written by

Harvey A. Miller, Ph. D. | Scholarship Chair, 1985—2010

*“When it all comes down to it, the Mercury Seven Foundation may be our greatest legacy.”  
Astronaut Wally Schirra, in private conversation, May, 2005*

During the twentieth anniversary celebration of Alan Shepard's May 5, 1961 flight, eight extraordinary gentlemen gathered in a hotel room in Los Angeles. Six surviving Mercury Astronauts--Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton, plus their flight surgeon Dr. Bill Douglas and an old trusted, friend, business man and holocaust survivor, Henri Landwirth needed to talk. They discussed how to continue to meet regularly and share a common purpose. They agreed to set up a foundation “to do good work,” as Henri described it, to be called the Mercury Seven Foundation. The first President and Chairman of the Board was to be Alan Shepard; the Vice Chairman was to be Deke Slayton who was replaced following his death in 1993 by Wally Schirra.

During the months following, they decided to award college scholarships to stimulate American students to study science and engineering. Henri agreed to finance getting the program off the ground with a gift of ten thousand dollars to cover the expenses associated with incorporation and a temporary staff. The Mercury Seven Foundation was announced in Houston in 1984, during the tenth anniversary commemoration of the 1974 death of Charles Lindbergh. A publicity photograph taken at the time showed the six astronauts and Betty Grissom. The names and images of Founders Bill Douglas and Henri Landwirth were neglected in early public press releases. Even so, they were correctly listed as Founders on Mercury Seven Foundation letterhead.

Following the announcement of the Foundation, Henri employed Kenneth B. Hobbs, former director of the Orlando Science Museum, to organize details and pursue incorporation and tax free status for the Foundation. During that process in 1985, Hobbs sought assistance to create a scholarship program from me, a friend, colleague, and botany professor from the University of Central Florida as well as Executive Secretary of the Florida Academy of Sciences. The resulting philosophy and plan of operation for the scholarship program that I devised was embraced by the Founders. It has remained little changed. Chairman Alan Shepard, whom I had met fleetingly with Ken once when he was in Orlando, asked me, through Ken, to chair the scholarship program. I accepted in a short letter to Shepard. After incorporation and tax free status were obtained, Hobbs found other employment.

Although I was a volunteer, initially not a member of the Board of Directors, I attended the annual meetings after the first awards. I was charged specifically to operate all aspects of the scholarship program excluding financial commitments. My responsibility was to recommend scholars to the Board of Directors at their annual Board meeting in May.

No astronauts were directly involved in developing scholarship recommendations submitted to the Board for consideration and approval. My job was to devise and operate an efficient and successful program within the limits of the Articles of Incorporation and the By Laws as I saw fit, and at arm's length on behalf of the Foundation.

The first time I met all six Mercury Seven Astronauts was at a fund-raiser in Washington, D.C. shortly after the first scholarships had been awarded. The first awards followed committee recommendations that were forwarded via Carole Landwirth who was in charge of the Orlando office. Bob Allen, Disney's public relations director, arranged for me to accompany him and Carole and her family to Washington on Walt's personal small airliner. The fund raising affair featured the astronauts and Bob Hope to provide entertainment. Dinner music was by the United States Marine Band that played for presidential affairs. Most of the large audience was comprised of wealthy upper level Washington dignitaries and lobbyists. During the afternoon before the dinner, a Board meeting was held at the Hilton Hotel. I was invited to attend. When I walked into the room, I recognized no one except Alan Shepard, whom I had met briefly a couple of times, Scott Carpenter whom I had met once at a Central Florida Explorers Club function, and Senator John Glenn from his pictures in the papers. Shepard conducted the meeting, then without warning called on me to explain how the scholarship program worked. I outlined how schools were selected, naming the ones proposed to be added, and how the selection process worked with minimum cost to the Foundation. The first question after I finished was from Wally Schirra, "Dr. Miller, what the hell is a Harvey Mudd?"

"Harvey Mudd is one of the Claremont Colleges whose incoming freshman class has higher test scores than either MIT or Cal Tech."

"That's good enough for me," and everybody laughed. Several detailed questions about operations were quickly answered.

Then Senator John Glenn spoke, "Dr. Miller, you propose to support upperclassmen and graduate students at selected colleges, but my staff tells me we should be putting our money into new high school graduates to encourage their selection of science and engineering."

"With all due respect, Senator, your staff is dead wrong--and here's why..." The room fell strangely silent. Who is this guy to tell a Senator he is wrong? I continued, "College freshmen are subjected to a multitude of distractions on campus—little outside discipline, the opposite sex, and booze. The academic competition is fierce because everyone came from the top ten percent of their class and coddling is over..."

He nodded in agreement as I continued, "...the first two years at a minimum, in a tough major in a demanding institution that holds the feet to the fire, establishes who is sufficiently driven and creative to excel. I believe this is where the money would be best used."

"Thank you, Dr. Miller. I will take this up with my staff."

As I walked out after the meeting, somebody grabbed my arm from behind. It was Senator Glenn.

"Thank you for telling me how it is. I get so tired of being told what they think I want to hear rather than what I need to hear. I hope you are with us for a long time to come." Wow! I never expected that.

The astronauts initially funded the scholarships by sharing their earnings from speeches and public appearances. That limited course was soon expanded. Additional fund-raising was undertaken in the face of the ever greater need for scholarship money and funds to maintain even a minimal office for the Foundation. Mrs. Edith Rawlins, who had worked for Henri prior to her retirement, agreed to handle routine correspondence. Carole Landwirth functioned as on-site director for a time from Suite 407 of the Barnett bank building in downtown Orlando. Alan Shepard handled Foundation business by telephone and during his visits to Orlando. He managed the Foundation from documents he carried. Financial limitations forced the release of Carole Landwirth, closing the office in the bank, and retaining only Mrs. Rawlins part time as a funded Foundation presence. Henri arranged with Budget Rent-a-Car to provide, at no charge, a desk for her in the copy room of their offices overlooking Lake Eola. I dealt with, typed, and mailed all correspondence and actions relating to the scholarship award process on Foundation letterhead.

Co-operating institutions were originally chosen because of their track record in the production of outstanding majors in the sciences. They were scattered geographically to establish proof that the Foundation was a nationally oriented American organization dedicated to slowing the accelerating erosion of America's position as a leader in world science—a process that continues as American youth withdraw from the demanding curricula and exploding expense of science education. One thing all selected had in common was a dedicated faculty of teacher researchers who mentored their talented students involving them in real research. That is why students must be recommended by a professor and cannot apply directly for a scholarship, and why the scholarships are awarded only at Foundation selected Institutions. That is why the Foundation awards scholarships on the basis of individual merit, personal drive, and creative initiative to challenge the status quo. These are the guiding principles sustained by the Foundation as envisaged by the founding Mercury Seven and their colleagues.

Initially, the annual Board meetings I attended were held at the Peabody Hotel in Orlando during the same weekend as Give Kids The World Black and White Gala fund raiser. Give Kids the World Foundation was a dream of Henri Landwirth to bring, without charge, terminally ill children and their families to Walt Disney World. Henri's astronaut friends, celebrities, and many others supported his efforts by being present to assist with raising money for his cause. The owners and management of the Peabody Hotel provided facilities and dinner for the Gala and meeting space for the Board of the Mercury Seven Foundation as their contribution. Since establishing a permanent base at the Hall of Fame and the employment of Linn Bernaw (now LeBlanc) in 2000, a separate Astronaut Scholarship Foundation Gala has been held annually since 2001 at Kennedy Space Center. It serves as a fund raiser for the Foundation in conjunction with the induction ceremonies to the Astronaut Hall of Fame. The Astronaut Scholarship Foundation Board meets at the Cocoa Beach Marriott Hotel that houses the astronauts, board members, and attending scholar alumni during the induction weekend.

The United States Astronaut Hall of Fame® outside the Kennedy Visitors Center opened with an outdoor ceremony May 11, 1990 honoring the Mercury Seven. The day was so hot and sunny that Henri Landwirth went to the gift shop and bought all board members and their guests a commemorative cap for protection from the sun. The press was abundantly represented including Walter Cronkite, a friend of the astronauts and Henri. Space Camp was minimized during the dedication.

About the same time, Howard Benedict, the retired and highly regarded Associated Press space correspondent, was enlisted by Al Shepard to join the Foundation as part-time Executive Director. Later because of Shepard's failing health, Jim Lovell agreed to serve as President and Chairman of the Board of the Foundation beginning in May 1997. He served in that office until May 2004 when he was succeeded by Owen Garriott. Al Worden accepted the Chairman's office in May 2005 with Bob Crippen as Vice Chairman. Crippen stepped down in 2009 and that office was filled by Robert "Hoot" Gibson who was succeeded by Dan Brandenstein.

Officers beginning in 2014 are Dan Brandenstein, Chair; Lisa Schott, Vice Chair; Michael Neukamm, Secretary/treasurer; and Tammy Knowles, Executive Director.

The Foundation office was moved from Orlando in 1990 to the Hall of Fame that was owned equally by the Foundation and Space Camp Florida (a subsidiary of Space Camp Huntsville) that managed both the camp and museum. Financial arrangements with Space Camp provided additional funds based on admissions to increase in the number and amount of awards for Mercury Seven Scholarships.

Financial difficulties at Space Camp headquarters in Huntsville, especially after September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, resulted in closing the Hall of Fame on September 17, 2002 as well as Space Camp Florida. Foundation presence as equal partners in the Hall of Fame museum created a Foundation liability. Bank foreclosure resulted in sale of the Hall of Fame leaving the Foundation with loss of equity, unpaid revenue, and loss of ownership. The refurbished Hall of Fame reopened under Delaware North management for NASA, the new owners, on December 14, 2002. Agreement was reached between NASA and Delaware North Companies for the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation to share income from admissions subject to an upper limit. In return, the Foundation agreed to supply astronaut appearances subject to acceptable conditions. The Foundation retains its office in the Hall of Fame and organizes a special committee charged with selection of Astronaut honorees. The Astronaut Scholarship Foundation remains completely separate from either NASA or Delaware North Companies although mutually beneficial close collaboration continues.

First inductees to the Hall of Fame were Mercury Astronauts named May 11, 1990. On March 19, 1993, the induction of the Gemini astronauts was formalized at a fund raising dinner held in the Cape Canaveral Radisson hotel where each diner received a commemorative bronze medal. Today, many astronaut inductees volunteer to work on behalf of the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation. Hall of Fame astronauts and biographies are available on the Foundation website.

Howard Benedict, Jim Lovell, and a special committee of the Board chaired by General Tom Miller negotiated the agreement with NASA and Delaware North with the assistance and guidance of Chief Operating Officer Dan LeBlanc. Under Howard's stewardship, the endowment grew from a modest sum to approximately two million dollars. He had substantial assistance from Linn who had been marketing manager for the Astronaut Hall of Fame. She was recognized as a superb fund raiser and organizer. Howard's "part time job" had evolved to much more than a forty hour week. During her tenure with Howard, she became Associate Director Linn LeBlanc. She organized the first ASF Gala fundraiser at Kennedy Space Center featuring pioneer astronauts and inductees to the Astronaut Hall of Fame. Linn was named Executive Director upon Howard's retirement on July 24, 2004.

Since then, the Foundation endowment and staff have increased substantially. Active participation by over eighty astronauts and growing involvement of space oriented public has allowed the Foundation to flourish. The scholarship awards have grown from seven scholarships of one thousand dollars in 1986 to twenty nine scholarships of ten thousand dollars each in 2014.

Mercury Seven/Astronaut Scholars have demonstrated that they have the kind of creative initiative, drive, curiosity, and willingness to "push the envelope" that characterized the Founders. Many have met astronauts during check presentations at their schools or while they attend the annual scholars meeting and symposium held jointly with the Board of Directors meeting and Hall of Fame induction festivities. The personal recognition by individual astronauts has given many scholars encouragement and confidence to exceed the early expectations held when they entered college.

“Meeting an astronaut and having a personal conversation has stimulated me to excel as well as giving me the self confidence to follow my dream” is a comment I have heard often in some form.

The life long bond among scholars and between the scholars and Foundation is encouraged and is demonstrated by their growing personal support for the Foundation. Much of the credit for this belongs to a Mercury Seven Scholar (1987-1990) from Georgia Tech, Lisa Riddle Beeson Schott who, at my request, personally maintained contact, beginning about 1993, with the growing number of scholars and served on the Scholarship Committee. She was instrumental in forming the Astronaut Scholars Honor Society, reporting on her efforts initially as my guest at the annual Board meeting. She was named to the Board of Directors in 1997. Dr. Larry D. Bradley (University of Central Florida Scholar, 1993-1994) who also served on the scholarship committee is the second scholar to be named to the Board of directors and serves the Foundation in several roles using his extraordinary computer skills, among other things. A Third scholar, Joseph Han (Texas A & M, 1999) has recently joined the board. Many other dedicated Scholars are active as volunteers for Foundation activities. The Founders envisioned a future when maturing scholars would play an increasingly active part, jointly with astronauts and other members of the Board, to maintain the integrity of the program that made such a difference in their lives. After all, who would know better what the scholarship means than a loyal recipient dedicated to the ideals of the Founders?

After 30 years of scholarship awards, over four million dollars has been invested in over 370 (through the 2014-2015 academic year) highly selected individuals of extraordinary talent and humanity who have become pioneers or made significant contributions in emerging fields of science. Many of the materials, applications and discoveries unknown, or only hinted at in 1984, have involved direct contributions by our scholars.

The wisdom of the Founders, who insisted that they desired to have some Mercury Seven/Astronaut Scholars involved in cutting edge science, in whatever field breakthroughs occur, is being demonstrated on a regular basis. They were, themselves, on the edge pushing the envelope, and sought to encourage others to be bold and daring but not foolish. Scholars continue to follow the astronauts’ example as they explore unknown possibilities in the future by new discoveries and inventions. And they have developed the courage and insights that eventually can carry the Foundation beyond the life span of the Mercury Seven astronauts and their two friends who, with help and cooperation of others, created it. Today, the completely independent Astronaut Scholarship Foundation awards the largest, solely merit based, scholarships in science and engineering in the United States.

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Below is an image of a document written by Dr. William Douglas (Project Mercury surgeon and an ASF Founder) outlining the very beginning of the Mercury 7 Foundation, now known as the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation.

MERCURY-7 TRUST  
BRIEF HISTORY



On Saturday the 12th of May 1984 the Mercury Astronauts held their 25th year reunion. Those in attendance included M.S. Carpenter, L.G. Cooper, J.H. Glenn, W.M. Schirra, A.B. Shepard, D.K. Slayton, and their wives. Betty Grissom also attended representing V.I. Grissom. Alan Shepard was the host, and he kindly invited Mariwade and I and Henri and Carol Landwirth.

On the 11th of May, during the late afternoon, Henri invited all of the men present to come to his hotel room. John Glenn was not asked to attend this meeting. Henri pointed out to us that John had incurred a debt of some \$3M as a result of his campaign for the Democratic nomination. Although John's own personal indebtedness in this regard was only \$50K he felt a moral obligation to see that the entire debt was liquidated. Henri suggested that the 6 men plus Betty get a group picture taken, then Henri would arrange for copies of the picture (autographed) would be sold through a publicity campaign which Henri would manage. The price per picture would be \$10.00. This money would be used to retire the debt. During calendar year 1984 Federal matching funds can still be obtained so we only have to raise \$1.5M.

All those present at the meeting agreed to Henri's plan. John was then asked to come to the room where the plan was outlined to him, and he also agreed.

The second part of Henri's plan was to establish a charitable foundation in the name of the Mercury Astronauts. This foundation would accept donations and would use the money for yet to be determined good works. Henri felt that such a foundation would bind together the Mercury astronauts and keep them a cohesive group. It would also keep the memory of the group alive in years to come. Henri suggested that the six men plus Betty be the members of the board of directors of the fund. He also asked that he and I be allowed to serve on the board. The others agreed to this proposal.

Henri suggested that John might be willing to turn over some of the proceeds from his public appearances to the fund in repayment for the participation of his colleagues in the plan to retire John's campaign debts. As I understand it, a Senator is allowed to earn only so much money from speeches and appearances. It was my understanding that John would, once he had reached that limit, ask that such fees be paid instead to the Mercury-7 Trust. I may not have understood that completely correctly. It is possible that John may be expected by the group to make other contributions to the trust.

On the night of Saturday, 12 May 1984 Henri arranged for Mr. Otis Imboden, a photographer for the National Geographic to come to the Club in the Warwick Hotel on Mainstreet to take the picture of the group mentioned above.

wkd *W.D. Douglas* - Written in my office at Huntington Beach, Calif.  
at 1030 hrs. Monday 21 May 1984