

US astronaut says legalize undocumented Mexicans

September 15 2009, By JULIE WATSON , Associated Press Writer



FILE - In this May 2004 file photo, Jose M. Hernandez, one of six mission specialist candidates in NASA's 2004 astronaut class, poses with a T-38 jet trainer aircraft at Ellington Field. Hernandez said Monday, Sept. 14, 2009 that the United States needs to reform its immigration policies and legalize undocumented immigrants. (AP Photo/NASA, File)

(AP) -- Spaceman Jose Hernandez said Monday the United States needs to legalize its undocumented immigrants - a rare, public stand for a U.S. astronaut on a political, hot-button issue.

Mexicans have hung on every word of NASA's first astronaut to tweet in Spanish - as Astro-Jose - since the son of migrants embarked on his two week, 5.7-million-mile mission to the [international space station](#) that ended Friday.

And they're still listening to him now that he is back on Earth.

During a telephone interview with Mexico's Televisa network, Hernandez pushed for U.S. immigration reform - a key issue for Mexico that has been stalled in Washington amid fierce debate.

"The American economy needs them," said Hernandez, 47, a California native who toiled in the cucumber, sugar beet and tomato fields alongside his Mexican-born parents. "I believe it's only fair to find a way to legalize them and give them an opportunity to work openly, so they can also retire in a traditional U.S. system."

[NASA](#) spokesman James Hartsfield told The Associated Press that Hernandez was expressing his personal views, "not representing NASA, the astronaut office or any NASA organization in his responses."

Hernandez said he wished all world leaders and politicians could see the Earth as he has, "so they could see our world, that really we are one, that we should work together."

"What surprised me is when I saw the world as one. There were no borders. You couldn't distinguish between the [United States](#) and Mexico," he told Televisa.

Hernandez's success shows why Mexican migrants have risked their lives to cross the U.S. border illegally to work their way out of poverty.

Millions in Mexico watched Hernandez's mission daily on Televisa, as well as following it on Twitter, where his dispatches appeared in English and Spanish. Hernandez also danced salsa, munched burritos and discussed Mexico's World Cup aspirations while floating in space aboard the shuttle Discovery.

Past NASA space missions barely got a mention on Mexican newscasts.

Hernandez's trip into orbit came at a time when the American dream for Mexicans and their families is fading. Deportations of illegal immigrants are at record levels, while tightened border security and the recession have caused a historic drop in the number of migrants heading north.

The rookie astronaut was one of two Mexican-Americans aboard, marking the first time two Hispanics have flown in space together. Astronaut Danny Olivas was making his second space flight. Rodolfo Neri Vela, a scientist, was the first Mexican citizen to make it to space, flying aboard the shuttle Atlantis in 1985.

Hernandez learned English at age 12, and applied for 12 straight years to become an astronaut before getting picked in 2004.

President Felipe Calderon has invited him to dinner at the presidential residence to talk about a future Mexican [space](#) agency. Hernandez's parents are from Calderon's home state of Michoacan, which has one of Mexico's largest populations of migrants in the United States.

The Michoacan town of Ticutaco, meanwhile, wants to build a science museum in his name to inspire others to follow in Hernandez's footsteps.

"Jose Hernandez sets an example for our youth," said the town's mayor, Ricardo Guzman.

More information:

Jose Hernandez Reaching for the Stars Foundation:

<http://www.astrojh.com/index.html>

Hernandez on Twitter: [http://twitter.com/astro\(underscore\)jose](http://twitter.com/astro(underscore)jose)

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