

# Astronaut's space tales aim to inspire

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Leland Melvin(C), a former astronaut and NASA's Associate Administrator for Education, speaks with students after reading "The Moon Over Star" to them at an elementary school in Washington, DC, on February 8, 2011, as part of African American History Month and the Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) DC Initiative.

When NASA astronaut Leland Melvin thinks back on his 12-year career, he estimates he must have read to a half million children, sometimes in classrooms, sometimes via videolink from space.

But he showed no weariness on a gray Tuesday afternoon when he strode into a public elementary school in a downtrodden section of the US capital where crime is high and test scores are low.

The Ferrebee Hope Elementary School, which teachers and students refer to as "The Hope," is surrounded by a tall chainlink fence and encircled by brick apartment buildings, many with boarded-up windows.

Inside the school library, a group of [children](#) handpicked for good behavior were rewarded with an opportunity to see an astronaut up close, look at [space](#) artifacts and hear stories of a world far beyond their own.

"As you get your education, you can do anything you put your mind to, right?" Melvin asked the several dozen children, aged eight to 11, who sat on the floor in front of him. A handful responded weakly: "Yes."

"What?" Melvin shouted. "Yes!" the children shouted back.

Melvin, one of 14 African-American astronauts who have flown in space, read to the children from an illustrated book that described a young girl who was inspired to become an astronaut.

He peppered the reading with tales of [space travel](#).

A video of him eating candy from a floating water bubble in space got plenty of laughs, and one mention of moving at speeds of 25,000 miles per hour drew astonished mutters of "Dang!" from a few of the students.

Moon boots provided the inspiration for running shoes that some of the kids were wearing, and no, astronauts do not eat pizza in space, he told them.

But they do read books up there, or just gaze out the window, and instead of taking showers they rub their faces with washcloths, he said.

Melvin, a former athlete, also recounted his personal story of being drafted to play with the Detroit Lions in the National Football League but then suffering an injured hamstring that ended his American football playing career.

After that, he became a research scientist with NASA. Later he became

a full-fledged astronaut and flew on two space shuttle missions, making it into space for the first time on his 45th birthday.

"I played sports but I studied really hard," he said. "That's what I want you to do. Use your science and use your math skills to become scientists and engineers."

The event was organized as part of Black History Month, and aimed to give African-American children access to a role model and a momentary exit from whatever hardships are in their lives, said principal Sharron Stroman.

"Our children don't go home to rich home libraries," she said. "But we are trying to build a community of readers.

"Children can travel in their minds through books," she said. Getting a chance to meet an astronaut "helps our children see there is life beyond their present surroundings."

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