

Giffords: A poignant presence, but out of view

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STS-134 Commander Mark Kelly, center, talks to his twin brother Scott, left, as mission pilot Greg Johnson, right, looks on after arriving at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Tuesday, April 26, 2011. Mark Kelly is the husband of wounded Arizona congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. The space shuttle Endeavour and her crew of six astronauts, is scheduled to lift off Friday afternoon on an 14-day mission to the international space station. Scott Kelly is not a member of the STS-134 crew. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

(AP) -- It's a sight many Americans would surely love to see: a recovering Rep. Gabrielle Giffords watching as her astronaut husband blasts off into space.

But it's unlikely they will see it. Giffords will attend Friday's [space shuttle launch](#) in Florida but watch in private, and her staff says there are no plans to release photos of her, though that could change.

Why is the congresswoman, whose recovery from catastrophic wounds has inspired so many, being kept out of public view?

First of all, it's long-standing NASA policy for all relatives at a shuttle launch. "It's just for privacy," said spokeswoman Nicole Cloutier-Lemasters at Kennedy Space Center at [Cape Canaveral](#). "They are here in a private capacity."

Sometimes family members choose independently to make themselves available, she said, but most decide not to.

"They're not the spotlight," added space center spokesman Allard Beutel. "They're not the public figure."

Of course, Giffords is a special case. There's extraordinary public interest in her progress since that horrific Jan. 8 assassination attempt in Tucson, Ariz., and in the simultaneous story of husband Mark Kelly's journey into space - a life-vs.-career dilemma like no other.

Details about Giffords' condition in the 3 1/2 months since she took a bullet to the head have been sparse. There have been no photos showing her face. A grainy video image purporting to show her slowly climbing stairs to board the plane for Florida earlier this week was the most visible and hopeful sign yet of her improvement.

Few would argue with a patient's right to privacy, even a public figure and officeholder like Giffords. But her [neurosurgeon](#), Dr. Michael Lemole, added another dimension to the privacy argument when asked recently if it wouldn't be beneficial for the public to see the effects of

the shooting.

"I understand that would be useful to the public, but I also understand that a picture is worth a thousand words, and with those words would come rampant speculation," he told the Association of Health Care Journalists earlier this month. "If you release one picture, people start speculating on what you will or won't do, on what you can or can't do."

Lemole, of University Medical Center in Tucson, added that when he performs brain surgery, the patient may have a swollen eye at the beginning and a bruise at three months, and then, at six months, look like someone who never had brain surgery at all.

"Perhaps the congresswoman, after all is said and done, after she recovers as well as she will, may release (photos) as sort of a retrospective documentary, and maybe that would be valuable," he said. But that, he made clear, lies well into the future.

Giffords had a piece of her skull removed shortly after the shooting to allow room for brain swelling and has been wearing a helmet adorned with an Arizona state flag.

Earlier this week, The Arizona Republic quoted her staff as saying she speaks in single words or simple declarative phrases, she has short hair with scars showing through, and her face is sometimes swollen but basically looks the same. Those close to her also said she can stand on her own and walk a little.

The congresswoman arrived in Cape Canaveral on Wednesday, leaving behind the Houston hospital where she has been undergoing rehab for the past three months. When she watches the shuttle Endeavour lift off Friday afternoon, it will surely be her husband's last mission in space. NASA is retiring the shuttles with one final flight in June.

"It's something she's been looking forward to for a long time," Kelly said of his wife's trip. "She's more than medically ready to be here."

Since the congresswoman's arrival, her whereabouts have been kept secret. A staff member said in a Twitter update Thursday morning that Giffords was enjoying Florida and "all the space action."

Giffords also was believed to have attended Wednesday night's family barbecue, a closed-door event.

[NASA](#) officials said they still didn't know where Giffords would view the launch. The congresswoman was expected to be in the general area of the presidential entourage, which will watch from an area near launch controllers.

Online, there seemed little if any criticism of the decision to shield Giffords from view.

"She should NOT be exposed to the public if she doesn't feel comfortable with it - it should be her decision!" Nancy Younce Volmer, a retired university administrator who lives in Warsaw, Ky., wrote in a typical comment on Facebook.

Another consideration was Giffords' physical and emotional well-being at the launch, noted Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

"You don't know how someone's going to react to all those people and all that movement," Helmke said. "We're talking about a serious, traumatic injury that happened less than four months ago. You wouldn't want to do anything in terms of crowds, cameras or questions that could possibly affect her condition. I'm sure that's what her doctors and family are concerned about."

Helmke noted that it has been just over 30 years since James Brady, a former press secretary to President Ronald Reagan, was shot in the head in an assassination attempt on his boss. Even now, he said, Brady has good days and bad ones, easy ones and difficult ones.

Besides, noted many, isn't there stress enough watching a spouse leave the planet?

"Things are tense enough with no injury at all," Helmke said.

To be sure, a photo of Giffords would be newsworthy. "This is a moment people have been waiting for," said Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., a journalism think tank.

But, he noted, the desire to know needs to be balanced against considerations of the congresswoman's well-being and the risk that people will draw premature conclusions about her condition. A solution, he added, might be a photo that is not overly invasive or revealing of specific details of her medical condition.

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