

Glenn marks 50 years since historic orbit of Earth

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Sen. John Glenn talks, via satellite, with the astronauts on the International Space Station, before the start of a roundtable discussion titled "Learning from the Past to Innovate for the Future" Monday, Feb. 20, 2012, in Columbus, Ohio. Glenn was the first American to orbit Earth, piloting Friendship 7 around it three times in 1962, and also became the oldest person in space, at age 77, by orbiting Earth with six astronauts aboard shuttle Discovery in 1998. (AP Photo/Jay LaPrete)

(AP) -- John Glenn made his historic spaceflight alone in 1962 but celebrated its 50th anniversary Monday among hundreds of people within his orbit, from fellow headline-making astronauts and NASA's administrator to family, friends and students at Ohio State University, where the public affairs school bears his name.

They watched footage of the [launch](#), laughed at his enduring sense of

humor and showered him with applause, praising the man who became the first American to orbit the Earth on Feb. 20, 1962.

[Neil Armstrong](#), the first man to set foot on the moon, told the audience at the celebratory gala that Glenn was "no ordinary pilot." There was a need for leadership in the [space program](#) in the early 1960s, Armstrong said, and Glenn "literally rose to the occasion."

The former astronaut and U.S. senator from Ohio, now 90, circled the Earth three times in five hours and was viewed as a national hero for helping to lead the United States into space.

"I think the hero thing is in the eye of the beholder," Glenn said during a question-and-answer session with Annie, his wife of nearly seven decades. "I don't look at myself that way."

Asked about his heroes, Glenn said he admires different qualities in different people, such as the perseverance of former U.S. Rep. [Gabrielle Giffords](#) of Arizona, who was severely injured in a shooting last year.

Her husband [Mark Kelly](#), a retired astronaut and commander of the space shuttle Endeavour's final mission, was the night's featured speaker and said he was honored to be sitting between two of his own heroes, Armstrong and Glenn. He brought the audience a message from Giffords: "Be passionate. Be courageous. Be strong. Be your best."

Glenn urged the audience to support research and education and shared the lessons he learned when he was among the top military test pilots presented in 1959 as the Mercury Seven. The only other surviving Mercury astronaut is Scott Carpenter, who called out the memorable line "Godspeed John Glenn" moments before the rocket ignited for Glenn's [spaceflight](#).

"With a lot of work and a lot of people organized, you can do almost anything," Glenn said.

Earlier Monday, NASA had surprised Glenn with the kind of anniversary gift only a space agency can give, enabling him to speak live with the International [Space Station](#) from a stage at Ohio State University.

Sitting on stage with NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, he chatted with three space station crew members about space research and NASA's future. Commander Dan Burbank appeared by video link, flanked by two flight engineers floating in the zero-gravity environment, and said the crew was delighted to help commemorate Glenn's momentous trip.

"Fifty years ago today, Friendship 7 was orbiting planet Earth, and that helped in a very big way, paved the way for America to become a space power, and to go to the moon, and to do the things that we're doing right now on the International Space Station," Burbank said.

Glenn had a light-hearted but educational exchange with the crew, asking them about the types and number of experiments on board - more than 100, they said - and explaining to his gravity-bound audience of more than 200 people that, for example, a candle burns differently in space than on Earth.

When Bolden asked the astronauts which experiment they'd like to hand off to Glenn if he could join them, Burbank suggested research on the "regenerative environmental control systems" on spacecraft.

"That's a fancy word for our toilet," flight engineer Don Pettit added. "So he wants to put Sen. Glenn busy fixing the plumbing up here."

Glenn took the humor in stride, replying: "That's exactly what I thought I was going to get assigned to."

Bolden joked that Glenn sometimes bugs him about making a trip to the space station. Glenn became the oldest person to fly in space in 1998, at age 77.

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