

Two years later, NASA workers still mourn end of shuttle

October 3 2013, by Mark K. Matthews



Few engineers at Kennedy Space Center invested as much in the space-shuttle program as Darrell Gheen, who worked all 135 flights from 1981 to 2011.

Though the Cal Ripken-esque achievement earned him a special patch, the streak didn't do much for the 53-year-old's job prospects once the program ended with the final mission of Atlantis in July 2011.

Like thousands of other ex-shuttle workers, Gheen - who spent the final 13 years of his shuttle career as a flight-controls engineer - was forced to find work wherever he could. It's a situation that, for many, remains stubbornly true two years later.

In Gheen's case, the end result isn't all bad. After working for months at a brother's boat-building company, he landed a job last year as a launchpad manager at a spaceport in Virginia at a higher salary, a rarity among ex-shuttle workers. But even that has its drawbacks: Others in his family stayed behind, in part because they can't sell their Titusville, Fla., house.

"It's been months since I've been home," Gheen said.

Up and down the Space Coast, a similar story is playing out for thousands of families. Though the initial shock of the shuttle's retirement has long faded, the grind to find meaningful work - and a comparable paycheck - remains a constant pursuit.

Some, like Gheen, have left Florida so they could keep working in the aerospace business. Others have stuck close to home, often switching fields to find new jobs - from teaching to lawn maintenance to asphalt resurfacing - at a reduced salary. One lucky group has managed to do both: stay local and in the aerospace sector.

But that's not the majority. At least not yet. And maybe not ever.

Precise figures on what's happened to the shuttle work force are unavailable, but this much is known: From 2008 till now, the number of Kennedy Space Center workers was roughly halved to its current figure of about 7,900.

Most of the roughly 7,000 who lost their jobs were not NASA employees but outside contractors, doing jobs such as refurbishing the tiles that protected the shuttle from harm. It was well-paid work. According to one 2008 study, the average shuttle contractor then earned about \$77,600 a year - nearly twice the mean salary of surrounding Brevard County.

But when the shuttle program ended without an immediate NASA successor, these workers were left with few options. So they scattered.

"It's been quite a roller coaster," said Gregory Cecil, a former tile technician now working as a middle-school science teacher in St. Petersburg, Fla.

Cecil took a buyout in 2009 but then spent more than two years trying to find a full-time job.

"I was really, really starting to fear I was never going to work again," he said.

Finally, he decided to switch fields and start teaching. His salary dropped from \$50,000 to \$30,000.

"I like it. I like where I am now," said Cecil, 49. "But I would rather be working on spaceships."

The current state of the U.S. space industry restricts that career path.

Despite the recent emergence of new players such as SpaceX of California, no one is expecting the industry to hire anything close to the standing armies once needed to put the shuttle into orbit.

And NASA is still years from launching its next human-rated rocket, the Space Launch System. NASA wants a first flight in 2017, but budget problems could push that date back. Any delay would be especially painful for KSC, as its primary role for decades has been preparing NASA spacecraft for launch.

But Brevard business leaders are optimistic. Though not ideal, local job figures have been far from devastating. As of July, the unemployment

rate in Brevard County was 7.8 percent - within arm's reach of the 7.1 percent state average that month, according to records from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That compares with 11.2 percent in August 2011, the month after Atlantis touched down.

"Given the circumstances, things could have been much worse," said Lynda Weatherman, president and CEO of the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast.

She credited several factors, including an aggressive effort by local and state leaders to lure new businesses to the area. These have resulted in an estimated 5,000 "announced" jobs in Brevard County, she said - though some won't be hiring for a couple of years.

Weatherman didn't have a breakdown of how many positions are filled. But she noted that the 5,000 figure includes 1,000 jobs that Northrop Grumman expects to add during the next four years at an aircraft-design center in Melbourne, Fla.

"I challenge any other community in this nation to respond how we have," Weatherman said.

Yet several ex-shuttle workers say that they've lost more than a paycheck.

"No one was expecting the same wages - or the prestige of working on a premier space program," said Terry White, who worked as a [shuttle](#) contractor for 33 years before losing his job the day after Atlantis landed.

Though he no longer works for a salary, White, 64, volunteers with

NASA as a tour guide for special guests visiting KSC. It helps him stay connected to KSC family, a bond that many of his co-workers have said is missing in their current [jobs](#).

"It's not the same camaraderie," he said.

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