

Seasoned US pilot Wally Funk to fulfill space dream 60 years on

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Sixty years after joining a private program with the hope of one day becoming an astronaut, US pilot Wally Funk will finally see her dream come true at age 82.

On Thursday, Amazon's billionaire founder Jeff Bezos invited her to join him on his spaceflight company Blue Origin's July 20 launch.

The flight will not just make her the [oldest person](#) ever to travel in space, but also a walking, breathing symbol of the rewards of audacity and perseverance.

"I like to do things that nobody's ever done," she said in a video posted on Instagram by Bezos.

Mercury 13

Funk grew up in the western United States in Taos, New Mexico. As a child she was passionate about aviation and took her first flying lesson at age nine. In [high school](#), she was barred from taking mechanics, a subject reserved for boys.

Such rules did not prevent her from obtaining a pilot's license and graduating from Oklahoma State University, known for its aviation [program](#). By now she has logged 19,600 hours of flight time.

At the very beginning of the 1960s she joined a privately-funded, innovative flight program called Mercury 13—which put women through the same training and tests as the male astronauts undergoing the official NASA program.

A doctor who helped develop the training tests, William Randolph Lovelace, decided to allow women to try them out in his private clinic to see whether they too were able to pass.

The 13 women became the Mercury 13—with Funk being the youngest among them.

"They were testing us to our extremes," she recalled in a 1999 interview with NASA.

Water was injected into her ears to induce dizziness. She had to ingest rubber tubes.

But "it was going to get me one step closer to space, and this is where I wanted to go."

During one trial, Funk was locked in a dark tank with perfect sound insulation, filled with water kept at her exact body temperature so that all feeling and sensation was lost.

"I was on my back, floating in water, without being able to use my five senses (...) I just had to stay there lying down", she says.

She broke the record by staying inside for 10 hours and 35 minutes.

In the end, "they told me that I had done the job better and faster than any of the men," she recalled during Thursday's video statement.

But the program was scrapped after being rejected by NASA and the first American women did not go into space until 1983.

"It was kind of interesting, the fact that we could have done it, and they just wouldn't let us. A dog did it. A monkey did it. A man did it. Women can do it too," she said in 1999.

Space dreams

Wally Funk applied to become an astronaut at NASA on four occasions. She was rejected every time.

One reason given was that she did not have an engineering degree and had not completed the flight program on a military fighter jet—an impossible ask of a woman at the time.

But Funk has never been short on ambition: she became the first female inspector of the American aviation agency, the FAA, then the first woman investigator for the American agency in charge of aeronautical disasters (NTSB).

She handled over 450 accidents by her retirement in 1984 and taught 3,000 people to fly.

And she never gave up her dream of leaving gravity behind and flying among the stars.

When asked about her greatest achievement in 1999, Funk replied: "If I can get to space, that's what it will be."

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