

Gala opens countdown to 50th anniversary of 1st moon landing

July 22 2018, by Alex Sanz And Mike Schneider



British physicist Brian Cox speaks at the Apollo Celebration Gala at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Saturday, July 21, 2018. The event kicked off a yearlong celebration of the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the first moon landing. (AP Photo/Alex Sanz)

Former NASA astronaut Buzz Aldrin was noticeably absent from a gala kicking off a yearlong celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first moon landing, even though his nonprofit space education foundation is a

sponsor and he typically is the star attraction.

No explanation was given for Aldrin's absence from the Apollo Celebration Gala on Saturday evening. But the former astronaut is locked in a legal battle with family members who say he is suffering from mental decline. The black-tie event, held under a Saturn V rocket at the Kennedy Space Center, featured a panel discussion by astronauts, an awards ceremony, and an auction of space memorabilia.

Hundreds of people attended the sold-out event, including British physicist Brian Cox, who presented Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson with the ShareSpace Foundation's Innovation award.

Branson, whose company is developing a new generation of commercial spacecraft, said in a recorded video that the Apollo missions influenced his generation.

"Space is still hard, really hard. It still really matters," Branson said. "There would be no Virgin Galactic, no Virgin Orbit and no spaceship company had it not been for Apollo astronauts and the thousands of talented people who made their mission possible."

Dr. Carolyn Williams of the nonprofit From One Hand To AnOTHER received the foundation's Education award, and former Johnson Space Center director Gerry Griffin, a flight director for all of the crewed Apollo missions, was honored with the Pioneer award.



Former Johnson Space Center Director Gerry Griffin, left, a flight director for all of the crewed Apollo missions, sits next to Apollo astronauts Harrison Schmitt, Rusty Schweickart, Walt Cunningham and Tom Stafford, from second from left, during a panel discussion at the Apollo Celebration Gala at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Saturday, July 21, 2018. The event kicked off a yearlong celebration of the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the first moon landing. (AP Photo/Alex Sanz)

"It's very humbling, it kind of came out of the blue," Griffin said. "It is so neat to know that we've passed the torch that will let this next generation take us to this next step."

That next step, Griffin said, is a return of Americans to the Moon and, eventually, Mars—something former Apollo astronauts Walt Cunningham, Harrison Schmitt, Rusty Schweickart and Tom Stafford discussed during a conversation with Cox.

"We're sort of going through a second door here. The door isn't all the way open—we haven't gone all the way through it—but it's cracked

open," Schweickart, who flew as the lunar module pilot on Apollo 9, told The Associated Press. "Space is going to be much less expensive to go to, and that's going to open up not just opportunities for people to fly, but because of the decreased cost, real opportunities for innovators to generate new ideas and to do things that have never been done before."

Aldrin's ShareSpace Foundation is one of the sponsors of the annual gala, which raises money for Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics—or STEAM education—and Astronaut Scholarship Foundation scholarships.



Christina Korp, left, a board member at Buzz Aldrin's ShareSpace Foundation, performs at the Apollo Celebration Gala at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Saturday, July 21, 2018. At right is Margie Gruba. The event kicked off a yearlong celebration of the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the first moon landing. (AP Photo/Alex Sanz)

Renowned Brazilian pop artist Romero Britto donated artwork from his

"Buzz Aldrin Space Series" for the auction, which also included a behind-the-scenes tour of Virgin Galactic in California and autographed space memorabilia. Tickets for the event ranged from \$750 to \$2,500 per person.

The former astronaut's expected absence comes just a month after he sued two of his adult children and a former business manager, accusing them of misusing his credit cards, transferring money from an account and slandering him by saying he has dementia. Only weeks before the lawsuit, Andrew and Jan Aldrin filed a petition claiming their 88-year-old father was suffering from memory loss, delusions, paranoia and confusion.

Andrew and Jan Aldrin, as well as business manager Christina Korp, are on the foundation's board and attended the gala. Aldrin's oldest son, James, isn't involved in the legal fight.

Andrew Aldrin acknowledged his father's absence during the gala.



The black-tie Apollo Celebration Gala is held under a Saturn V rocket at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., on Saturday, July 21, 2018. The event kicked off a yearlong celebration of the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the first moon landing, and featured a panel discussion by astronauts, an awards ceremony and an auction of space memorabilia. (AP Photo/Alex Sanz)

"We're sorry dad can't be here, I know some of you are disappointed," Aldrin said. "Ultimately, what we're about is creating the first generation of Martians."

Buzz Aldrin said in a statement that he didn't attend the gala "due to the present course of events related to my space initiatives, also current legal matters linked to the ShareSpace Foundation."

"I formed ShareSpace Foundation in 1998 for the promotion of individual space voyagers," Aldrin added. "The Foundation is, in my view, now being used to promote quite different objectives."

Buzz Aldrin, along with Neil Armstrong and Michael Collins, was part of the Apollo 11 mission which landed the first two humans on the moon on July 20, 1969.



Andrew Aldrin, Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin's son, attends the Apollo Celebration Gala at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Saturday, July 21, 2018. The event kicked off a yearlong celebration of the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the first moon landing. (AP Photo/Alex Sanz)



In this July 15, 2017, file photo, Christina Korp, Buzz Aldrin's business manager, speaks at the commemoration for the upcoming anniversary of the 1969 mission to the moon and a gala for the non-profit space education foundation, ShareSpace Foundation, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Aldrin is expected to be noticeably absent from a gala kicking off a yearlong celebration of the 50-year anniversary of the first moon landing, even though his foundation is a sponsor and he typically is the star attraction. Organizers haven't heard one way or another if Aldrin is attending Saturday, July 21, 2018 evening's Apollo Celebration Gala at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, but they expect him to be a no-show. (AP Photo/Alex Sanz, File)



In this July 15, 2017, file photo, Andrew Aldrin, Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin's son, speaks at the commemoration for the upcoming anniversary of the 1969 mission to the moon and a gala for the non-profit space education foundation, ShareSpace Foundation, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Aldrin is expected to be noticeably absent from a gala kicking off a yearlong celebration of the 50-year anniversary of the first moon landing, even though his foundation is a sponsor and he typically is the star attraction. Organizers haven't heard one way or another if Aldrin is attending Saturday, July 21, 2018 evening's Apollo Celebration Gala at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, but they expect him to be a no-show. (AP Photo/Alex Sanz, File)



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