Wernher von Braun

Photo courtesy of NASA

Birth: March 23, 1912**,** in Wirsitz (Wyrzesk), Poland
Death: June 16, 1977
Profession(s): Mechanical engineer, physicist
Publications: *About Combustion Tools (1934)*
Remembered for: Direct contributions to development of rockets and rocket boosters
Quotation: "The mastery of space is man's greatest adventure and his most inspiring undertaking. It should spur us to maximum effort. The nation which mastered all of man's earthly environment - - land, sea and air -- owes to its destiny the mastery of the limitless environment of space."

A Closer Look:

From early childhood, Wernher von Braun had a great interest in space travel and astronomy. As a teenager, von Braun came across an article written by Hermann Oberth with an illustration of a rocket traveling to the moon. His mother saw his immediate interest in astronomy and bought him a telescope. At that time, von Braun was not particularly concerned with his studies at school. As a matter of fact, he was failing mathematics and physics. However, his interest in the field of astronautics gave von Braun the boost that he needed to apply himself to his studies. He studied so hard and made such progress that he graduated at the head of his high school class.

After graduation from high school, von Braun entered the Berlin Institute of Technology in 1930. There he began his early experiments with testing liquid-fueled rocket engines while assisting Hermann Oberth. In 1934 at the age of 22, he obtained a doctorate in physics from the University of Berlin with a thesis on rocket engines.

His team of scientists, along with Oberth, was instrumental in designing the rockets and guided missiles used by Germany against Britain in World War II. At the end of the war, rather than surrender to the Soviet army, von Braun, Oberth, and their team surrendered to the United States. With his team numbering over 120, they were brought to the U.S. in September 1945 to work on guided missile development. Von Braun continued to work in rocketry and transferred to NASA shortly after its inception in 1958. There he became Director of the Marshall Center. His Saturn V rocket won the race to put a man on the moon's surface in 1969. After his retirement from NASA in 1972, von Braun went on to found and become first president of the National Space Institute, a private group that was designed to increase public understanding and support of space activities.

Wernher von Braun and his wife, Marie Louise, had three children. He died on June 16, 1977. At the time of his death, he held honorary doctorate degrees of 19 colleges and universities, and had been the recipient of numerous awards.

References:

http://history.msfc.nasa.gov/history/mm/vonbio.html Biography of von Braun published in the *Marshall Star.*
http://www.asc.edu/archives/famous/academy/w_braun.html Biographical sketch compiled in 1969 by the Alabama Department of Archives & History.
http://www.spacevoyages.com/visans2.html Biographical piece focusing on von Braun's work in rocket research and development of rocket engines.
http://www.windows.umich.edu/ From the Windows on the Universe site, you may go to biographies of Goddard, von Braun, and Oberth in the People sub-site.