

**REMARKS FOR ADMINISTRATOR BOLDEN  
DEDICATION OF DR. RONALD E. MCNAIR  
LIFE HISTORY CENTER  
March 21, 2011**

Thank you, Senator Graham. Mayor Anderson. Mr. Cooper. It's good to be back in my home state. I appreciate your invitation to join this celebration today of my good friend, and a great American, the late Dr. Ronald E. McNair.

It's appropriate that this facility is called a "life history" center. Because Ron's life mattered a lot to many people. His positive influence is still being felt and will continue to be felt for generations to come. In this audience today are many people who shared various aspects of his life. Who helped him become the man we celebrate today.

Ron was a fortunate presence in my life. When I met him, I had already graduated from the Naval Academy and embarked on my military career for 12 years. He convinced me that I should apply

to the astronaut corps. It wasn't something I'd really considered and at the time I simply dismissed the idea. But Ron was a persuasive person, and after talking with him, the idea grew on me.

I probably don't need to tell you that joining the astronaut corps changed my life. I flew four times into space -- twice on Discovery, the orbiter that just completed its final mission, STS-133, last week. Unfortunately, Ron perished on Challenger in the very next mission after my first flight into space aboard Columbia in January 1986.

He and the rest of that crew were personal friends, and that kind of loss and sacrifice is something you never forget. It re-energized NASA's commitment to safety. It's one reason when President Obama asked me to become NASA Administrator, I decided to postpone my "transition" – as my wife calls retirement – and help bring our space program to the next level of innovation – to honor

the commitments of people like Ron, and the many thousands of people who have worked tirelessly to make the space shuttle the amazing program it has been. We have to remember that flying humans into space will never be risk free, but we can do many things to make it as safe as possible.

As many will attest, Ron was built for this stuff. He couldn't get enough of the sciences and math and technology. This very library that now helps us learn about his life once tried to deny him its books. You know that story. At nine years old, Ron had inadvertently become a civil rights activist.

But this gathering, this center, is not about what Ron was denied, but what he did in spite of the obstacles. The positive outlook he maintained, and the many others he helped.

I think Ron would be amazed, and pleased, at many of the things NASA has accomplished and our plans for the future - that the

shuttle has made possible the engineering marvel known as the International Space Station, a global partnership that itself would have been hard to imagine when Ron was alive - that we've launched amazing observatories like Hubble, and visited Hubble itself four times and performed in space maintenance on it to make it better - that we have rovers on Mars and a satellite at Saturn, one now orbiting Mercury, and another on its way to Pluto - that we now have humans living in space 365 days a year and are developing the next generation of spacecraft to take us even farther into the universe. Ron would have understood all of these things. He would have applauded.

Ron was one of three Black astronauts selected in 1978 -- in a class of 35 from 11,000 applicants -- in the first group of Space Shuttle astronauts. But he was much more special than even those statistics attest. His awards and honorary degrees are numerous. He was posthumously awarded the Congressional Space Medal of Honor.

Cheryl, I want you to rest assured that your husband will never be forgotten at NASA. Or at this facility we dedicate today. Ron's gifts and labors were exceptional...and his contributions to his nation are lasting.

Who can tell a life story? We can recount the highlights of a life. I can tell you what Ron did, as the exhibits in this wonderful center do. There are schools named after him across this country.

Engineering buildings on several college campuses. But the life itself is harder to capture. The music and athletics that helped shape Ron into a scientist and explorer. The hard work in the farm fields around here that helped give him stamina and a drive to overcome adversity. All of these things are hard to quantify. A man's true personal legacy is hard to define. The way one's influence moves others to carry a spark and spread it across the world. But at the core of it, that's what we're here today to celebrate.

Ron was a very generous man. He shared his story in schools and churches. Whoever invited him usually got him, if he was able to fit it into his busy schedule. I think about that sometimes as I speak to as many students as I am able. Their enthusiasm and excitement about the future is a lifeline for all of us. At NASA we're working hard to get young people from all walks of life, especially the ones like Ron, who may not come from schools that adequately feed their intellectual hunger. I like to think Ron would have been involved in those efforts no matter what he would have been doing otherwise in his life at this date.

I'm a little older than Ron would have been today, but I stood on his shoulders. He was the second Black man to travel to space. It's still not common, but I'm happy to say there have been quite a few since – men and women. He was the first to play saxophone in space – in fact, may still be the only one!

It was Ron's hope to return to this community and help youth who wanted to follow his path. He didn't get to come back, but with his actions, his words, and things like this wonderful center, he is still reaching out a helping hand to them. God speed, Ron, and to all of us who carry your crucial legacy!