

Wendy Lawrence, Captain USN *NASA Astronaut (retired)*

Growing up in southern California during the 1960s, Wendy Lawrence could have easily adopted the relaxed surfer lifestyle embraced by most of her friends. She didn't because, in July 1969, something changed her life. As her family gathered around the television to watch Neil Armstrong's historic walk on the moon, the ten-year-old was instantly bitten by "the space bug." As the brave astronaut spoke his now-famous "that's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," Wendy Lawrence took a giant leap of her own. In that moment, she decided she too wanted to be an astronaut...*and her life was never the same.*

It was only a few weeks later when the groundbreaking concert known as Woodstock became a decade-long theme for many young people. Hippies ruled. Space travel was just for men. Feminism and the woman's movement was just a vague concept. Traditions still encouraged women to take a back seat in life, rather than lead, so they could be homemakers and caregivers for their spouse and children. Most adults would have listened to Wendy's dream of going into space and dismissed it as girlish fantasy. The cultural odds were against Wendy Lawrence. However, while the world was wrapping itself in flower power, Wendy Lawrence got on her path to becoming the proverbial *Right Stuff*.

As she began her quest, Wendy looked first to her closest resources, her father and grandfather. Both had careers as Navy pilots and were strong role models for flying the skies. In addition, her father was involved in the space program, specifically in helping to choose the first astronauts. Instead of discouraging his daughter, he advised her to look at the backgrounds of the space pioneers and model them. She took his words to heart.

For the next few years, Wendy Lawrence read and studied about the qualifications and dedication of those first few men chosen for the space program. She realized that, in order to accomplish her dream of space travel, she needed a superior education that would position her for a solid career.

Starting with high school, she focused on academics and worked hard. Next, though she knew it would be a huge challenge, Wendy applied to and was accepted at the United States Naval Academy. She graduated in 1981, a member of the second co-ed class in the academy's history. A year later she was awarded the designation of naval aviator and went on to earn her masters from MIT and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, both highly specialized degrees from predominately male-based schools. Captain Lawrence returned to the Naval Academy in 1990 where she taught physics.

Finally, in 1992, hard work blended with experience and Lawrence was selected by NASA to complete flight training. A year later, she qualified as a mission specialist, approved for flight. Over the next few years, Wendy completed four space flights and logged over 1225 hours in space. She was part of the space program during the Columbia tragedy in 2003. While it was a shocking blow for everyone in the space program, it affected her personally. She acknowledges sadly, "It's hard to lose one friend...but to lose seven of them at once is just absolutely devastating."

Through risks and rewards, Wendy worked in the space program for fourteen years. She retired from NASA in 2006. Looking back, she is grateful that she got to live her dream. In fact, when speaking to young people – something she finds personally satisfying – she advises them to choose a career that provides the motivation to "spend however many hours it's going to take that day to get the job done." She also suggests that they value the end result because that's what will enable them to "get up in the morning and really look forward to going to work."

Wendy Lawrence practices what she preaches. Though her astronaut days are over, this strong and dedicated woman fuels her dreams every single day. Wendy utilizes her innovative energy as a Senior Advisor for Human Spaceflight, Crew Safety, and Safety and Mission Assurance for Andrews Space, Inc. in Houston. She is also participating in the development of the Rocketplane Kistler K-1 crew and cargo module.

In spite of the obvious gender obstacles, rigorous training and the long-term time commitment, as well as the physical, mental and emotional demands of a career in space travel, Wendy consistently advances, step-by-step, toward her goals. She appreciates the accolades she receives and also likes to give them. "When you pursue a dream," she says, "you need a lot of help." She credits her high school English teacher for being a great motivator and her physics teacher was – and still is – very influential. Wendy also acknowledges "a variety of coaches and friends along the way."

Wendy Lawrence's childhood inspiration became her passion. In the tradition of many a victorious woman, she fashioned her passion into a goal, spliced it to a plan, took action and persisted through one victory after another.

*Cheers to you, Wendy Lawrence!
In finding a way to make your dreams come true,
you served our country, inspired young people, and honored every woman!*