

FAU astronaut leaves students starry-eyed

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What goes through an astronaut's mind as he prepares to journey into space?

If you're sitting on the launchpad and you have to go to the bathroom, "launching is the quickest way to get there," Steven Swanson joked.

The 47-year-old, who received his master's degree in computer systems from Florida Atlantic University in 1986, returned Thursday to his alma mater, where hundreds of students from Broward and Palm Beach counties heard about what it takes to have the right stuff.

The father of three injected his hourlong talk with much humor.

How did he become an astronaut?

"It's a government job. You fill out that 25-page government form everybody has to, to be a government employee. It's a wonderful thing, trust me," he said.

Swanson, seated on a couch onstage in the university's theater, answered questions from Karl Stevens, dean of the College of Engineering and Computer Science, and Boca Raton Mayor Steven Abrams, who also gave him the key to the city.

Ten students also were selected to ask Swanson questions such as what the view is like from space and how Swanson prepares physically for a mission.

Austin Haynie from Boca Raton High School wanted to know what steps Swanson took to be accepted by NASA and how difficult it was.

Swanson said there are 3,000 to 4,000 applicants for 20 slots that open only every three to four years. He explained that at the very least NASA looks for someone with a bachelor's degree who is well-rounded.

"You're competing with a lot of people who want the job, so you have to go above those minimum requirements," said Swanson, who was accepted the second time he applied.

Swanson said that when he came into the program it was at the worst possible time.

"When I first came in they thought they would have the space station up and running with seven astronauts in 2000," he said. "But it didn't get going until quite a bit later and they only had three people on board, so there was a backlog of people."

Swanson returned from a two-week mission in June that included a nearly 6 1/2-hour spacewalk during which he and fellow astronaut Patrick Forrester activated a rotating joint on the space station's newest segment so a pair of solar wings can track the sun and provide power to the station.

Swanson looks forward to another trip into space next November.

He also hopes to join the crew of the international space station for a six-month stint in space in the future.

What does his wife think of his being away for that long?

"She probably would be very happy. The paycheck is direct deposited," he said.