

FAU grad who became astronaut returns for honorary degree

By MARC FREEMAN
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BOCA RATON - Long before he became an astronaut, flew aboard space shuttle *Atlantis*, visited the International Space Station and performed two spacewalks lasting nearly 14 hours, Steve Swanson was a University of Colorado graduate looking for a place to earn a master's degree.

So what attracted him to Florida Atlantic University in 1984?

"The beach," Swanson admitted, during a presentation Thursday for more than 300 middle and high school students from Palm Beach and Broward counties.

His search for a tropical setting paid off. "I happened to luck out and find a very good school at the same time," Swanson said. "I did look into the actual academic program."

Swanson received a master's of applied science in computer systems from the university in 1986.

This week, just six months after his first space voyage, he returned as a celebrated alumnus and hero.

Swanson was inducted into the FAU Alumni Hall of Fame on Wednesday. On Thursday, Boca Raton Mayor Steven Abrams gave him a key to the city.

Today, he'll receive an honorary doctorate during a fall commencement ceremony. Swanson will give the university the gift of a blue and silver FAU banner he took on the shuttle.

The university will confer 2,200 degrees during three graduation ceremonies today, expanding the list of more than 102,000 alumni who have graduated from FAU in its 43-year history.

But Swanson, 47, is the only FAU graduate to have rocketed into space.

"The launch is a fantastic experience," said Swanson, who joined NASA in 1987 as a systems engineer and was selected to join the astronaut program in 1998.

His long wait to blast off ended this year, when he served as a mission specialist on the 118th shuttle mission. Swanson is set to return to the space station on a shuttle trip planned for fall 2008.

At Thursday's event he gave a firsthand account of his experiences, showed a video of his shuttle mission and talked about the future of the U.S. space program.

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