

Astronaut presents items flown in space



HOMETOWN PHOTO: Astronaut Clay Anderson, a native of Ashland, autographs a photo of his hometown taken from space during a ceremony Friday night at Willow Point Gallery in Ashland. Anderson presented the photo and an ornament he flew in spaced to the City of Ashland during the presentation. The ornament honored Anderson's historic flight into space as Ashland's, and Nebraska's, only astronaut. (Staff Photo by Suzi Nelson)

By Suzi Nelson

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ASHLAND – It was a night of honor for a hometown boy who gave back to the community and the people who helped shape him.

Clay Anderson, a native of Ashland and the state's only astronaut, presented special items to city officials and family members Friday night that he had taken with him on his second and most recent space mission last April.

To Ashland Mayor Paul Lienke, Anderson presented a special ornament he flew to space. The ornament was created by Ashland artist Gene Roncka and it depicts local history, including Clay's first space mission in 2007, when he spent 152 days onboard the International Space Station.

Before going up in space, Anderson requested an item with special meaning to the city and himself be taken with him on his second mission in space. The City of Ashland purchased the ornament and gave it to him and he packed it in his luggage before boarding the shuttle Discovery for a two-week mission in April.

After Anderson returned from space, the ornament was placed in a red velvet and gold trimmed frame that he autographed with a gold pen on Friday before presenting it to the city.

Anderson also autographed a framed photo of the city he snapped while on his 2007 mission. Anderson told the crowd that filled the art gallery that he had to work hard to obtain the picture of his hometown of 2,500 people, a feat that isn't easy to do from 220 miles in space, because the U.S. doesn't have brightly colored state lines like it does on maps, and, adding, *"there's no upside down in space."*

After several attempts, he finally located Ashland, and when he did, it was emotional.

"When I saw Ashland, I cried," he said.

Anderson thanked the community for being a large part of his success as an astronaut. The trip home was an opportunity to *"shake the hands of the people that raised me,"* he said.

Anderson took the opportunity in front of a crowd filled with high school classmates, old neighbors and family friends, to honor not only the community where he grew up, but also his family.

"Coming home is always about family," he said.

He presented his brother Kirby Anderson with a watch he flew in space, noting that it makes up for "about 10 birthdays" he's forgotten over the years. Kirby thanked him with a big hug.

The atmosphere was equally as emotional as Anderson honored his sister Lorie Hartzell with a pin that had originally belonged to their late father, Jack Anderson, who died in 1984. He took this item on the Discovery mission to honor both his father and Lorie, he said. Their mother, Alice, died in 2007, shortly after Anderson returned from space.

Anderson spent a great deal of time before and after the presentation meeting with the audience, posing for pictures and signing autographs. One of the most unique items he signed was the "My First Space Encyclopedia," a science book for children featuring his picture on page 41, that Jason and Leslie Gerdes of Ashland brought with them.

The night before, Anderson and his siblings attended the Ashland City Council meeting as the council passed a resolution naming the city ball fields after their father, who had been an avid volunteer and fan of youth sports during their childhoods.

The complex of softball and baseball fields will now be called the **Jack Anderson Ball Park**.

"On behalf of the family, I'd like to thank you all for considering this resolution," Anderson told the council.

"We really appreciate it."

Bob Crisler of the Ashland Youth Ball Association said the group first considered naming a ballfield after Anderson. However, Anderson told him that he thought his father would be a more worthy honoree. Crisler said he confirmed that by talking to "old timers" who agreed that Jack Anderson had made significant contributions to the youth ball program in its infancy, including starting a Pee Wee tournament over 30 years ago that is still taking place today.

The mayor told Anderson that the city reserves the right to name an individual field after the astronaut.

"We're okay with that," Anderson replied. "I'll let you know when I get back from orbit next time."

In addition to the visits to his hometown, Anderson filled his Nebraska trip with several appearances. On Wednesday, he met with Olympic gold medalist Curtis Tomasevicz, a Shelby native, at the Nebraska Club in Lincoln. Anderson flew a pair of Tomasevicz' gloves in space. He presented them back to the bobsledder, who in turn gave Anderson another pair of gloves to keep.

On Thursday, he met with youngsters at Children's Hospital in Omaha.

Friday's agenda included interviews with radio and television stations.

Another highlight of Anderson's trip home was a chance to present some special souvenirs to the College World Series officials before the start of the first game on Saturday. Anderson took a baseball and other mementos into space, and also had the Discovery crew sign baseballs. In addition, he presented officials with a picture of Rosenblatt taken from the International Space Station.

Originally, Anderson was hoping to throw the first pitch for the first game. However, he learned later that NCAA officials do not have a first pitch thrown, although they made an exception in 2001 for President George W. Bush.

Accompanying him on most appearances was his 9-year-old daughter, Sutton Marie. His wife, Susan, and son, Cole, were back in Texas.

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