

rocket booster



Right, Joe Lennox and his space-shuttle snow globe in a room devoted to Space Age memorabilia in his River Edge home. A toy astronaut, above, that was brought to one of Lennox's lectures by a child.

Banker shares passion for space with schoolchildren

By JEAN RIMBACH

By trade, Joe Lennox is a banker. Most of his days focus on international money transfers.

But on a recent Saturday morning, Lennox was in front of a classroom with flight plans and photos, a circuit board and models, a temperature gauge from a lunar module and space suit material.

His audience: second- and third-graders.

"The Moon being so far away, we need some heavy-duty rockets. So we need the Saturn 5," an enthusiastic Lennox explains to the rapt pupils as he begins to construct a replica of the rocket that launched Apollo to the Moon.

"These engines are so thirsty," he says of its five engines. "Ever see a gallon of milk? It will take 3,000 gallons of milk in a second."

Lennox's hands-on, interactive space lessons are one product of a passion that began when he was not much older than these students at the Gifted Child Society. It's a fervor that dates to a decade dominated by the race to the Moon and marked by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin's historic lunar landing.

The 46-year-old River Edge resident and assistant bank vice president is a self-made space historian and teacher. He has amassed not only knowledge of the American space program but a collection of memorabilia of such massive and unusual proportions that it takes up an entire room of his house.

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Above, Lennox teaching a class at the Gifted Child Society at Bergen County Technical High School. "The interest is really there among the children," Lennox says. Left, Sean Buckley, 7, showing Nathan Cho, also 7, a toy space-man he brought to class.

SPACE

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"It's mind-boggling the amount of space that's there," Lennox said. "The exploration of what's there — we can only benefit from it."

"My kids laugh at me. Sometimes I'll go out at night and look up at the Moon and say, 'If people walked on that,'" says the father of two sons, 20 and 21. "It just amazes and mystifies me."

Framed newspapers in Lennox's artfully laid out "space room" trumpet the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's triumphs and tragedies. Revolving display cases are laden with such treasures as a copy of an onboard tape of air-to-ground conversation from Gus Grissom's Liberty Bell 7 flight, a cooling tube from an RI-0 rocket engine, and an O-ring from a solid rocket booster.

There are shuttle tiles, Fisher Space Pens, and dozens of colorful patches mounted and framed. Posters and pins. Technical manuals, 9,000 pages of news clippings dating to the Mercury missions, and some 700 letters.

Much of his bounty is courtesy of astronauts, contractors, flight commanders, and others with ties to the space program. A NASA patch from Charles Duke — the 10th moonwalker — shows evidence of wear, and a photo of New Jersey from space was a gift from astronaut Terry Hart.

"It gives me immense joy," Lennox said. "I can't thank people enough."

Lennox appears to have collected the right stuff. His memorabilia is willed almost in its entirety to the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame in Florida, located at the gates of the Kennedy Space Center.

"It's a most impressive collection. He's got some really nice stuff. He has saved this stuff religiously from the beginning," said Howard Benedict, executive director of the U.S. Astronaut Scholarship Foundation, which helps to operate the Hall of Fame. "It will be a great addition."

Benedict, who has visited Lennox's home, notes the vast amount of potential research material as well as items signed by astronauts. He said part of the collection — including magazine and newspaper articles — would probably make its way to a research library that will be added to the facility in

the coming years; some of the other memorabilia would go into the Hall of Fame.

"It will be a very valuable asset." For now, its value is to Lennox personally and those who call on him to share his prizes and knowledge in schools and other arenas, such as the workshops he has conducted at the Gifted Child Society for the past three years. His teaching work began with a visit to one son's kindergarten class and grew into a part-time job that he hopes one day will be his occupation.

"He does a wonderful job. They (children) are just completely enthusiastic," said Gail Volke, a third-grade teacher at Ridgewood's Ridge School. "He answers all their questions, which they have a lot of. He motivates their thinking and talks to them on a level they understand."

"The kids really liked it because he actually brought real things in — it was a very hands-on assembly. He made comparisons. ... They were really impressed," said Alexis Eckert, assistant principal of the Highland-Godwin schools in Midland Park. "He has some real talent, real teaching talent."

The serious collecting began when Lennox and his older sister, Mary, joined forces after John Glenn's 1962 Earth orbit. From their Bronx apartment, they conducted an all-out writing campaign. Growing bold, they requested anything that might represent the space program.

They clipped articles of manned missions, they made scrap books, and they eagerly watched for the next treasure to arrive in the mail. They even received a tour — and a model of a lunar module — from Grumman Aerospace.

A letter from Aldrin dated March 20, 1969 — shortly before his historic flight to the Moon — was the first response from a bona fide astronaut.

"Your letter was an inspiration," it begins, "not only to my wife and me but also to our three children who are perhaps too close to the space program to fully realize its extent and potential."

Lennox beams thinking of its arrival. "That was a major winner."

There's a lengthy note from Armstrong's mom from Dec. 17, 1960.

"Yes, this truly has been a wonderful year, and I'm thankful to be living in this era," Viola Armstrong writes to them. "Even if I were not the mother of Neil, I would be stirred from within at the

progress our country has made."

By 1971 his sister's interest had waned, and Lennox was working solo. The archives and collection continued to grow, with such items as mini-spacesuit guides and a piece of reflective insulation from the leg of a lunar module.

The goal was always to make the most complete museum possible dedicated to the men and women who have made this program possible," he said.

"It's truly been a labor of love."

That's never more clear than when Lennox is reliving the kindnesses shown to him amid his carefully labeled space riches. He talks excitedly about his 1972 invitation to the launch of Apollo 16 by George Lowe, then a deputy administrator at NASA. He was "thrilled" to get on the launch pad for a look at Atlantis in 1990 — thanks to Mike Leinbach, then a NASA test director.

"If you see it from that angle, it's incredible," said Lennox, describing 16-inch fuel lines. "It's amazing the bloody thing ever flies."

Lennox's friends and family also give him related collectibles, and he has built models and made purchases. There are commemorative plates and coins, watches, stamps, books, cards, and the U.S. Space Program edition of Monopoly.

And even this most serious collection has a bit of kitsch. Less prominently displayed are such items as Barbie, Snoopy, and Mickey Mouse in spacesuits.

As a teen, Lennox wanted to be a NASA flight controller. But during his second year at LaGuardia Aeronautics College, he was diagnosed with an eye disease. He received two cornea transplants and was out of school for nearly three years. By the time doctors said he could do most anything, he had met his wife, Mary. Thoughts turned to marriage, and he went after his first bank job.

Lennox has never stopped clipping newspapers — he subscribes to one in Florida to get all the shuttle news — and continues to write letters, though the response rate is not what it used to be.

Lennox says he found a way to be true to his collecting and teaching, hopefully inspiring future scientists, engineers, or space travelers.

"The interest is really there among the children," said Lennox of the reaction he gets in the class. "Maybe someday I'll create an astronaut."