

# NASA's chief aims to hook young minds on space

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By BILL FARRELL Observer-Dispatch

It's unlikely that investigators will find a single factor that caused the space shuttle Columbia to break up, killing all seven astronauts on board, NASA administrator Sean O'Keefe said Saturday.

"It's appearing more and more likely that it was a combination of events that developed and ultimately led to" the Feb. 1 shuttle accident, O'Keefe said during an interview with the Observer-Dispatch at the Children's Museum here.

"There won't be a dramatic scene like (with the 1986 Challenger explosion) where a Dr. (Richard) Feynman drops an O-ring into a glass of cold water and it breaks," O'Keefe said. That demonstration settled a debate among experts about whether cold would make O-rings brittle.

"There's not going to be a screaming 'ah-ha' moment," he said.

O'Keefe and a group of other NASA representatives, including Astronaut Leland Melvin, came to town at the invitation of Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-New Hartford, for a "science for the generations weekend," and they were welcomed with open arms.

Some 150 people crowded into the once-vacant, musty and heatless fourth floor of the Children's Museum that's now filled with science, and especially space displays and exhibits, to watch as O'Keefe accepted a Book of Condolences signed by museum visitors since the shuttle disaster.

It was the administrator's second visit to the museum. He was here last August when officials announced that NASA had "adopted" the museum and would link up with it for scientific displays and hands-on exhibits.

The condolences book was presented by museum Executive Director Marlene Brown. The museum also is hosting NASA's traveling Starship 2040 exhibit. Utica is the final stop on a 21-day state tour, and Brown said the exhibit has been so popular that its stay has been extended a day, through Monday.

O'Keefe, Melvin and Boehlert told the audience -- many of whom were students -- the importance of hooking young minds on the space program. "We're talking about our future," Boehlert said.

It also was a theme that O'Keefe emphasized during the interview.

"We need to inspire the next generation of scientists, engineers and astronauts. It's an essential ingredient of what we do," he said.

One young museum visitor, 10-year-old Nicholas Rotundo of Remsen, spoke at the ceremony of one day becoming an astronaut.

"Nothing's impossible. ... It means never giving up on your dream," he told the audience, which rewarded his ambition with applause. Later, Melvin signed a space poster for the youngster with these words: "One day I hope to see you flying in the heavens."

Earlier this month, O'Keefe urged Congress to allow the space agency to change the ways it recruits its brightest scientists and engineers.

He warned that NASA faces dangerous shortages because of upcoming retirements and fewer college graduates with skills it needs.

Boehlert, chairman of the House Science Committee, has introduced a bill that includes many of the changes NASA is seeking.

NASA has received "extraordinary support" from the American people since the Columbia tragedy, O'Keefe said, and although this is a tough time, he hopes what will emerge is "a willingness to see this through, learn from it, make the corrections, fix what's wrong and get back to exploring safely, as safely as we can."

Does that mean manned exploration?

"Any exploration into the unknown is going to be risky," said O'Keefe, who received a master's degree from Syracuse University in 1978. "The trick is, how do we provide robotic capabilities to pave the way to understand more about a mission objective."

He cited repairs to the Hubble telescope. Last year, there was a successful mission designed to upgrade the telescope "by a factor of about 10," and install new capabilities and new technologies that didn't exist 10 years ago. "The only way you can do that is by having humans do it," O'Keefe said.



NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe speaks at the Children's Museum Saturday afternoon in Utica. In the background are Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, left, and astronaut Leland Melvin.