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## Shades of Blue Honors Challenger Astronauts and Educators

No

By S. Clayton Moore

The men and women of Shades of Blue have come a long way. At its annual awards ceremony, held at the Inverness Hotel on October 7, the organization not only honored the innovators and educators who inspire them, but also announced ambitious plans for their own education initiative.

"We want to open our own online charter school," confirmed Captain Donell Smith, a pilot on the Airbus A320 for United Airlines and the organization's director of student affairs. Shades of Blue hopes to open its own school, with an aviation-heavy curriculum culminating in pilot lessons for older students, by the fall of 2006.

"We know there are other schools like this throughout the country but we're going to make sure that this one is the best," Smith said.

Shades of Blue is a Colorado-based nonprofit organization conceived by Captain Willie Daniels, a pilot for United Airlines, and a dozen of his colleagues in the airline industry. Founded in 2003, its mission is to provide guidance, training, educational assistance and career services to young people wishing to pursue careers in aviation and aerospace.

This is the third year the organization has presented the Ed Dwight Jr. Award, honoring the aerospace and education achievements of national leaders in education. The award is named for pioneering African-American astronaut trainee Ed Dwight Jr., who was personally appointed to the space program by President John F. Kennedy. Dwight, who has since become one of the country's preeminent sculptors, is currently working on the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. He also sculpted the award that carries his name.

Channel 4 meteorologist Dave Aguilera served as the master of ceremonies at this year's award ceremony. Awards were presented to Lieutenant Governor Jane Norton of Colorado, who co-chairs the Colorado Space Coalition, and to Dr. Yvonne Freeman, executive director of SECME, Inc., formerly known as the Southeastern Consortium for Minorities in Engineering. The



L to R: Willie Daniels and Channel 4 meteorologist Dave Aguilera, who served as master of ceremonies.





organization is one of the nation's premier pre-college strategic alliances in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Norton described her experiences attending the White House Christmas party and meeting President George Bush. She also touched on the importance of nonprofit organizations like Shades of Blue.

"Real positive change comes from a community," Norton said. "It comes from the ground up through organizations and



Ed Dwight, America's first black astronaut trainee, shares a laugh with Dr. Gary Coulter, who heads the Challenger Learning Center in Doonbeg, Colorado Springs.

nonprofits like Shades of Blue. When you think about it, the strength of Colorado, just like the strength of America, is found in the hearts and souls of its citizens. It's found in their drive to help others, to take responsibility for those around them and not assume some government entity is going to do it for them."

Dr. Freeman's experience includes serving as a NASA associate administrator from 1993 to 1996, where she was the highest ranking African-American female in the institution. Since moving to Atlanta-based SECME, Inc., she has helped the organization build a coalition of 45 engineering universities, 118 school systems and 70 corporate and government investors.

"We're in the kid business," said Freeman of her work. "We're in the inspiration business. The core of our work is teacher renewal. We're losing 2.2 million teachers in this country. Ninety-five percent of teachers in mathematics in this country aren't certified to teach in our schools. Children are only 25 percent of our population but they are 100 percent of our future."

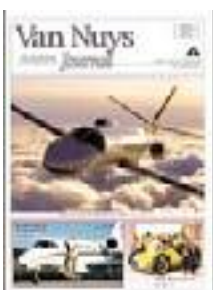
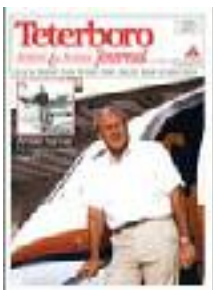
Shades of Blue also presented a special award to the families of the astronauts aboard Challenger 51-L, the space shuttle that exploded on Jan. 28, 1996. Those astronauts--Commander Dick Scobee, pilot Michael Smith, payload specialist and teacher Christa McAuliffe, and mission specialists Ellison Onizuka, Gregory Jarvis, Judith Resnik and Ron McNair--are also remembered through the Challenger Center for Space Science Education, founded by their family members.

Cheryl McNair, widow of veteran astronaut Ronald McNair, accepted the award on behalf of the Challenger families. She praised the positive impact that Shades of Blue has on young people.

"It's exhilarating to hear about the many motivating activities here, particularly your youth involvement and mentoring initiatives," McNair said. "Programs such as the Challenger Centers and Shades of Blue give an awareness to youth who may not have had this positive exposure. These programs promote aviation and science and math in a way that makes it fun, relevant and enjoyable, dispelling fears of the unknown and removing those potential barriers to learning. These programs



Cheryl McNair shared poignant memories of her husband, Ron McNair, who brought his saxophone into space, planning to share a medley of tunes with his fellow Americans on earth.



Willie Daniels presents Cheryl McNair, widow of Challenger astronaut Ron McNair, with a special award recognizing the crew of Challenger 51-L.

help direct students toward a career in the future."

Daniels and the prestigious board of Shades of Blue, which includes several pilots from United Airlines and business leaders from Denver's leading aerospace corporations, presented the awards. Corporate sponsors include Jeppesen, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin and Futron. Daniels and his partners hope to attract more support for their efforts from the corporate community as well as support from the aviation community for their new Aero-Club initiative, developed in conjunction with Metro State University's aviation program.

"It's getting harder and harder for kids to get lessons and hours," Daniels said. "Any of the flight schools that are willing to work with Shades of Blue would be appreciated."

The organization is also planning to repeat last year's event, "From Red Tails (Tuskegee Airmen) to Shades of Blue," an educational event celebrating African-Americans in aviation at the Wings Over the Rockies Museum in February.

"I really am surprised at all the progress we've made in a few short years," Daniels said. "I guess you can attribute our progress to the fact that there's a need for what we're trying to do. We still have a long way to go."

*For more information about Shades of Blue, visit [www.ourshadesofblue.org](http://www.ourshadesofblue.org). For information about the Shades of Blue charter school, send an email to [info@outshadesofblue.org](mailto:info@outshadesofblue.org).*



Shades of Blue President Willie Daniels and his wife Perezza.



L to R: Honorees Dr. Yvonne Freeman, Cheryl McNair and Lt. Gov. Jane Norton talk over dinner at the Inverness Hotel.



Lieutenant Governor Jane Norton of Colorado praised Shades of Blue founder and President Willie Daniels for his efforts.



Dr. Yvonne Freeman, executive director of SECME, Inc., receives the Ed Dwight Award from Shades of Blue board member Robert Adams and sculptor Ed Dwight.

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