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Good morning,
Donna Swanson!
 Thank you for subscribing to the EagleHerald

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To infinity and beyond

Astronaut visits with Peshtigo students

By **DAN KITKOWSKI**
 EagleHerald Editor

PESHTIGO—A lot of children dream of becoming an astronaut. A select few make it happen.

“I always thought it would be cool, but I did not think it was a possibility,” said Mark Vande Hei, an astronaut who spoke Tuesday at the Peshtigo Elementary Learning Center (PELC). “I really thought of astronauts as super heroes. Saying I wanted to be an astronaut was like saying I wanted to be Spider-Man. It’s just not a very mature thing to say.”

Vande Hei not only became an

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EAGLEHERALD CONTRIBUTOR/PAUL WILLIAMS
 Amelia Votis listens to Mark Vande Hei describe his experiences on the International Space Station after asking her question Tuesday at the Peshtigo Elementary Learning Center.

Astronaut

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astronaut, but he's a record holder—setting the mark for the most continuous days (355) in space by a United States astronaut. He accomplished the feat aboard the International Space Station (ISS), returning to Earth in March of this year.

Vande Hei is the cousin of Jodi VanVooren, a fourth-grade teacher at the PELC. He also has a cousin who teaches at a Green Bay school and he visited there on Monday.

In Peshtigo, Vande Hei spoke to two groups of students—kindergarten through second grade, followed by third through sixth grade. He showed a video, conducted a demonstration that put the enormous size of the universe into perspective, answered students' questions and offered life advice.

Vande Hei, in between the sessions, talked to the EagleHerald about becoming an astronaut.

"I was really shocked when someone handed me a minimum list of requirements to become an astronaut and I had randomly met most of them," he said. "Even then I thought, 'that's crazy, there's no way they would ever hire me. All the way through getting my second interview, I still thought, 'there's no way this is going to work out, don't get your heart set on it.'"

Part of the path that led Vande Hei to NASA include a Master's degree in physics from Stanford University, an Army career that included two tours in Iraq and the eventual rank of colonel, and teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point (N.Y.).

His work at NASA began in 2009 at the Mission Control Center in Houston. He has undergone several space missions, the last being the record-setting event.

Vande Hei said his boss asked him if he would go on that mission, but it was by no means a clear-cut decision. The 55-year-old astronaut, with a wife and twin children (age 24), had to consult with his family.

"He (his boss) said it might be a year long," Vande Hei said. "I talked to my



EAGLEHERALD CONTRIBUTOR/PAUL WILLIAMS

Students give the thumbs up response Tuesday during astronaut Mark Vande Hei's session at the Peshtigo Elementary Learning Center. Front center left is Liam Schultz and to his right (with the flag) is Charlotte Lesneski.

wife and children about it and I said we should assume this will be a year long, I want to make sure you are all OK with that.

“ ”

"I really thought of astronauts as super heroes. Saying I wanted to be an astronaut was like saying I wanted to be Spider-Man. It's just not a very mature thing to say."

Mark Vande Hei
ASTRONAUT

"I also told them that if I said no, I felt like I was killing off a part of myself I wasn't ready to close the book on yet."

Vande Hei said his family gave its support and the mission was on. He said the physical training was easy because he had recently returned from a mission and was in sound physical shape. He

said the intense training involved learning about the space station systems and

specific technical details.

Will this be his last space mission? Vande Hei thought before answering.

"That's what I said after my first flight," he explained. "No, I don't expect to go back space. I would really like to make sure I'm around for those big family events."

Part of Vande Hei's duties now is traveling throughout the country

talking to students from kindergarten through college, business groups and more. (He put in a request for Peshtigo, he said, and obviously it was approved.) He said the most challenging group of students are eighth graders.

"They are the oldest kids in school

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DNR listening session set this month

Meeting planned in Marinette

MARINETTE—A DNR listening session regarding PFAS investigations in Marinette, Peshtigo and surrounding communities will take place Oct. 26. Afternoon and evening sessions will be provided.

The first session will be from noon to 2 p.m. and the evening session is 6 to 7:30 p.m. The listening sessions will be conducted in-person at

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) in Marinette. People may also attend via Zoom or phone.

- **In-Person Location:** Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, 1601 University Drive, Marinette, WI 54143. Room MN 101/102; (Enter at Door No. 21—door closest to Green Gable Road from Parking Lot A).

- **Virtual Option:** Zoom video conferencing, Meeting ID #82291809472

- **By Phone:** Dial

312-626-6799, Meeting ID #82291809472

The listening sessions will include routine updates from the DNR and the Department of Health Services (DHS) regarding the status of the PFAS investigations in the community. Representatives from several DNR programs will participate in these sessions to answer questions and hear concerns from community members regarding the PFAS cleanup and investigation.

PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a group of human-made chemicals used for decades in numerous products including non-stick cookware, fast food wrappers, stain-resistant sprays and certain types of firefighting foam.

These contaminants have made their way into the environment through spills of PFAS-containing chemicals, discharges of PFAS-containing wastewater to treatment plants and certain types of firefighting foams.

Participants are strongly encouraged to submit questions in advance through email at DNRJCIPIFAS@wisconsin.gov or by telephone at 1-888-626-3244.

The Zoom meeting link and an agenda for these online listening sessions will be posted on the DNR's Marinette and Peshtigo PFAS webpage.

Recordings of these listening sessions will be placed on the Marinette and Peshtigo PFAS webpage following the events.

Astronaut

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and the big dogs on campus," he said. "They are a little bit more daring with the questions they ask. They might say, 'Isn't the Earth flat?' I really think it's not so much they care about the answer as they want to show how cool they are. By far, most of the questions are good."

Peshtigo's third- to sixth-grade group asked solid questions, such as: "What is the coolest thing you saw?" ("The Northern and Southern Lights," he answered.); "Did you find any weird creatures that you've never seen before?" ("No, but one of NASA's objectives is to look for evidence of life in the universe. We're still looking and I think the chances are good," he said); "What is the first thing you wanted to do when you got back to Earth?" ("Eat chips and guacamole," he answered.)

Vande Hei was born in Virginia, but grew up in New Jersey and Minnesota. VanVooren said she and her cousin would go horseback riding in Peshtigo when they were young.

"Most of our visits were in Green Bay because that's where much of the family lived," she said.

VanVooren said her students looked forward to meeting her cousin, especially those who got to see him last year during a virtual visit from the ISS.

She credits PELC principal Kate Willett with doing much of the leg work to get the in-person visit together.

"It's a really special event for us here at school—especially because it's come full circle with his visit virtually last year and now him in person," Willett said following Vande Hei's sessions. "It's been really great for our kids to look forward to."

Willett said she had to deal with

NASA, setting things up and following proper protocol. "We just worked our way through it and had good communication," she said. "It really takes everyone from our IT department, teachers, some administration involvement, too, just to make it all come together. And the students really drove the point home—I loved their questions."

Vande Hei talked about teamwork in his closing remarks to students.

"I often get asked, 'What does it take to become an astronaut,'" he said. "You always try to do your best—put some effort to try and make your best better. We need people that are really big team players on the space station or travel to space. Interpersonal skills are much more important than technical skills. You've got to work together."

"Even though I always want you to be your best, put more effort into the people around you also being their best, rather than you standing out and always being better than people. So be a team player."

He also told students not to fear failure.

"Look for opportunities, challenging things," Vande Hei said. "As human beings we don't like failing. But to grow, to go ahead and challenge yourself, to learn new skills, to learn about yourself, sometimes you've got to do things where you're not sure you're going to succeed or fail. So go ahead and take those risks and learn from the challenges, even if you fail."

And one more thing about becoming an astronaut. "Go to usajobs.gov and apply to be an astronaut," he said with a grin.

Dan Kitkowski can be reached by email at dkitkowski@eagleherald.com



EAGLEHERALD CONTRIBUTOR/PAUL WILLIAMS

NASA astronaut Mark Vande Hei, with help from students, demonstrates the distance from Earth to the moon and to Mars Tuesday at the Peshtigo Elementary Learning Center. At left is Haddie Nault and in front is Micah Nutt.



EAGLEHERALD CONTRIBUTOR/PAUL WILLIAMS

Peshtigo students give astronaut Mark Vande Hei a high five as they enter the gymnasium Tuesday at the Peshtigo Elementary Learning Center. From left is Alivia Haulotte, Maybrieh Wilson and Archer Michalski.

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