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THE 4-H astronaut

An Iowa farm girl goes from showing cattle to running the space station.

When she looks out her window, Peggy Whitson no longer sees the familiar Iowa countryside where she was raised. Instead it's the gentle curve of planet Earth—bright greens, rich blues and wispy whites. She's 220 miles out of range today, commanding the International Space Station.

This is a window seat it took Whitson 37 years to reach. She credits her experience growing up on a farm and her years in 4-H with giving her the can-do spirit that brought it all together.

Whitson made her first trip into space in 2002, when she stayed for six months. The skills she learned growing up came in handy when space station maintenance was required.

“My dad, a farmer, always said you can fix just about anything with a ‘number 2 wire and a pair of pliers.’ It seemed to me like we were testing the limits of his

philosophy on this one,” Whitson wrote in her online journal after a particularly grueling repair.

Whitson's success doesn't surprise family friend Earl McAlexander. He grew up 5 miles from the Whitson farm and says the astronaut of today was always “very inquisitive and interested in things dealing with nature.”

That natural curiosity led Whitson to explore and develop her interests, says mother, Beth Whitson. During her years in 4-H, Peggy learned to cook and sew, showed cattle, raised chickens and participated in demonstrations. “We told her she could do whatever she wanted,” laughs her mother.

Peggy obviously believed it. At age 9, she remembers watching Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon and thinking, “why not?” It was a big dream for a girl from the tiny town of Beaconsfield, Iowa.

That little girl grew up and graduated with a double major in biology and chemistry. She went on to get a Ph.D. in biochemistry. From there, she applied for the astronaut-training program at NASA, but was turned down.

Her consolation prize was a biochemistry position with NASA, but she never stopped aspiring to become an astronaut. For 10 years she applied. Then in 2002—more than a decade later—Whitson's dreams were realized.

After that first flight in 2002, Whitson didn't keep her feet on the ground for long. In October 2007, she blasted back into orbit—and into history. This time she would serve as the first female commander of the International Space Station.

These days Whitson is something of a hometown hero. The Mt. Ayr, Iowa, newspaper regularly prints excerpts from Whitson's NASA journal, and the school she attended has a display devoted to its famous student.

“What's amazing,” says friend McAlexander, “is just how ordinary Peggy makes her job sound.”

“I always tell kids to pick something they really like because they really need to excel in it,” Whitson said, addressing an Iowa group in 2003. “You need to have fun along the way, whatever you choose to do in life.”

—Claire Vath

1974

4-H membership exceeds 7 million as a result of the 4-H television series “Mulligan Stew.”



2002

4-H celebrates its 100th anniversary.

2007

4-H sets a goal to double the number of youth in 4-H clubs to 3.4 million by the year 2013.