

AGE OF DRONES

Local astronaut flies on New Shepard

BY DON IRELAND

Local astronaut doesn't fly a drone (yet)

If you think you're too old to fly a drone, think again. If you'd guess a grandmother couldn't become an astronaut, make a different guess.

I got to sit down and chat with Laura Shepard Churchley recently at a middle school library in Greenwood Village. As an incentive to get kids to read more books, the school invited the newbie astronaut to hand out space-adventure books to students. Of course, she autographed many of them for the hundreds of students who stood in line waiting to meet her.

The 74-year-old grandmother of four, who has a home in nearby Evergreen, became an astronaut in December. Laura became something of an instant international celebrity after her flight in the New Shepard rocket. It is a spacecraft that is part of Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin, a private spaceflight company that is working to send tourists to space on its reusable suborbital rocket.

If her name rings a bell in your head, it should.

Laura's father – legendary astronaut Alan Shepard – is the namesake for The New Shepard spacecraft.

In 1961, Alan Shepard became the first American to travel into space. He was a member of the famous "Mercury Seven" astronauts. Laura, the eldest of three children, was a schoolgirl when her father first flew into space. Years later, Alan Shepard, as commander of the Apollo 14 mission to the Moon, famously hit two golf balls on the lunar surface.

"I tell people it took me 60 years and a week to get into space. Daddy went up 60 years ago and it took me a week to train (for my flight)," said Shepard Churchley, laughing. The one-time astronaut has no plans to fly to the moon or return to outer space. However, she inherited her father's passion for golf and flying. She studied to become a small-plane pilot and did a solo flight when her daughter was three.

At an event last year commemorating the 50th anniversary of Apollo 14, she and others were taking about Blue Origin program, Jeff



Laura Shepard Churchley wears her Blue Origin flight suit when she speaks to audiences.



In an astronaut's outfit reminiscent of the ones used in the Moon landing, Laura Shepard Churchley advocates for young people who are interested about learning about space technologies.

Bezos and the New Shepard spacecraft. "I came up with the idea that it would be neat if a real Shepard could be on the New Shepard."

To make a long story short, word got around to the right people. Lauren ended up with an invitation to fly on the New Shepard. She was one of two honorary, non-paying guests. The other was Michael Strahan, 50, a retired NFL star and co-anchor of ABC-TV's "Good Morning America."

Lauren's entire flight on the New Shepard lasted for a little more than 10 minutes on Dec. 11. The crew got to experience weightlessness. The six-story-tall spaceship flew to about 350,000 feet before gently returning to Earth with parachutes. "It was a flight like my father took," she recalled. "In 1961, he went up into space and was weightless for three minutes before coming back to Earth safely. I only went 66 miles into space – daddy went 160 miles. We came down five miles from where we had launched. Daddy landed more than 300 miles east from where he took off, into the Atlantic Ocean. Daddy was strapped in and flying his spaceship, so he didn't experience weightlessness. We had harnesses on (during liftoff) but were allowed to take them off later. We did summersaults and handstands – it was really fun."

The experience of her father and his inspiration have propelled Lauren into a variety of endeavors. She is actively involved in the space and astronauts' community, chairing the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation Board of Trustees. She is an honorary consultant of the Christa McAuliffe Planetarium and formerly served on the board of the Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center Foundation in Hutchinson, KS. In addition, she is a charter member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and a board member of the Evergreen Chamber of Commerce.

During my chat with the astronaut, I mentioned I flew a drone and use it to take photos for *The Weekly Register-Call*. She gave me a surprising response. "I haven't flown a drone yet but I'd love to fly one!"

Although flying a drone isn't at the top of Laura's list of things to do, it wouldn't surprise me if she ended up getting behind the controls of one someday. Apparently, she's not of the opinion that she's too old to learn something new, such as flying a drone. One thing for sure: she's definitely not afraid of space – whether it's at the controls of a drone, being in a plane's cockpit or floating around in space on the Blue Origin.