



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Astronaut stays down to earth

DAVID LAUDERDALE, *Packet columnist*

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GREENVILLE -- Space pioneer John Glenn is 85, and he still has a sharp eye on our planet.

He told a gathering of some 800 people at Furman University on Monday night that you don't have to orbit Earth to know it's fragile -- and individuals, corporations, cities, counties, states, nations -- all mankind -- can't put it off any longer, he said. Together, we must change old global warming and other strains on nature's ability to right itself.

Glenn's perspective on the world always has commanded attention.

People my age struggle to put into words what Glenn's blast into space meant when he was the first American to orbit Earth in 1962.

At my grade school, we were marched single-file into the auditorium to witness unfathomable history on a grainy black-and-white television. Brains knew this was a giant leap for mankind. We couldn't grasp conquering "outer space." But when it worked, our can-do pride, our sense racing through our veins like jet fuel.

On Monday night, I got to meet this American icon. His childhood sweetheart, Annie, is still at his side. He still pilots airplanes. His mind is Corps-erect; his stare, straight; his voice, calm and assuring. He's also very down to earth.

Glenn was the keynote speaker at a national environmental conference ending today at Furman University's Riley Institute. Glenn was invited by former Gov. Dick Riley. I was invited to appear on a panel of journalists at the conference.

Glenn symbolizes the America that leapfrogged the world, turning what he called "a tiny little nothing of a new continent" into the world less than 120 years.

His world view was formed in Ohio in hard times.

"I was 10 years old or 12 years old in the Great Depression," he said. "Unemployment was 25 percent one year. I don't think anybody worried in those days."

But he stressed that now we know better. We're armed with experience, data and computer models. And we must act.

Twenty-four years in the U.S. Senate taught Glenn he doesn't rule the world. And he joked that Annie can give him a quick grounding when he makes a lavish introduction.

But if Glenn was in charge, he'd focus America's best minds on a single project, just like the proven method of the Manhattan Project of old. The goal would be harnessing energy in a different way. The goal would be to find a way to store electrical energy in massive amounts, just like the E little amounts.

Whoever figures this out, he said, will change the course of history.

For one thing, that would put us in the fast lane toward his dream car -- an all-electric model with a range of 250 miles.

Glenn said the pilot in him makes him love a checklist.

On his environmental list are many energy-conservation measures. They range from scoldings like he got as a child when he left a light on, in San Francisco to convert the flow of the tide beneath the Golden Gate Bridge into electricity.

"I think we'll get back into nuclear power one of these days," he said. As for the waste, he's always thought it would be best to store it on site when technology will enable its reuse.

Alternative fuels can play a bigger role, he said, but we'll need to get more energy from it. Brazil gets more than four times the energy from ethanol than we get from corn, he said.

Glenn hearkened back to the day when whale oil lit our world -- until we killed too many whales.

"History really does repeat itself," he said. "We're in a modern-day version of running out of whale oil all over again."

The laws of nature don't change, so mankind is going to have to.

One change must be in the classrooms, Glenn said. He was chairman of a commission for Riley, when he was U.S. education secretary, to evaluate education. We're far behind in both subjects, Glenn said, and we need to put more into basic research. That's what built America.

"We learned the new stuff first," he said. "To me, it's just as important today."

Glenn said he tries not to do it, but he could not help but bring up his space travel. By the time he returned to space in 1998 to orbit Earth 13 shuttle Discoveries, the view had changed.

"To look back on Earth from space is very, very impressive," he said. "You see the sunset and sunrise at 18 times the normal speed. You see oranges, reds, yellows and violets, as if you're staring into a prism."

"You look back and you see the tiniest little blue band back there. That's the Earth's atmosphere. It's a tinier little level of atmosphere than you see. And it's what sustains all life."

"We don't live in an atmosphere that can take everything we can throw at it," he said. "We live in a film of air -- a tiny film. If we foul it up, it's coming back."