

# Space program legacy in Juneteenth

**Sculptor, oldest man to go into space, was first Black astronaut trainee**

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The creators of the Juneteenth celebration Saturday in Paterson, New Jersey, are dedicating it to astronaut Ed Dwight, who earlier this year became the oldest man in outer space at age 90.

Dwight eclipsed the record set by actor William Shatner, his 48-day junior.

So Paterson's event is not just a Juneteenth, but – if you will – a Moonteenth.

“You’re always honored when people go to that extent,” said Dwight, speaking from his home in Colorado.

Dwight also is a nationally known artist, whose pieces are permanent installations in cities like Chicago; Atlanta; Charleston, South Carolina; Austin, Texas; Denver; and Washington, D.C.

Dwight was, in 1961, NASA's first Black astronaut trainee. He was a national celebrity, lauded by the mainstream press, and featured on the covers of *Ebony* and *Jet*.

He should have gone to the moon, but there were complications.

“When they tried to kill me, that’s when I resigned,” Dwight said.

Dwight, born in racially segregated Kansas City, Kansas, was lucky enough to have a smart mom, Georgia Baker Dwight, who would give him nightly lectures on orbital mechanics, lunar cycles, planetary cycles.

“The only planetarium I had was the most brilliant mother a person can have,” Dwight recalled. “But when I was in astronaut training, I’m sitting attending this class and saying, ‘Oh my God, these are the same things my mom taught me when I was 3 or 4 years old.’”

He developed an early interest in engineering and aviation, enlisted in the Air Force, eventually earned the rank of captain, and trained as a test pilot – while also graduating cum laude from Arizona State University with a degree in aeronautical engineering.

The resume attracted John F. Kenne-



**“On Wings of Freedom,” a sculpture at Huntoon and Van Renssaler Under Ground Railroad Historic Site in Paterson, New Jersey by Ed Dwight, a test pilot and the first Black astronaut trainee, and recently the oldest human to go to space.**

PROVIDED BY JIMMY RICHARDSON

dy, who knew he needed to court African American voters he needed if he was going to win in 1960.

Whether because of racism, or resentment at Kennedy's interference – probably both – Chuck “Mr. Right Stuff” Yeager and other members of his Aerospace Research Pilot School made sure life was hell for Dwight during his training at Edwards Air Force Base. What they didn't know is that he had a lifeline. The Kennedys were looking out for him.

“All through my training, I was being monitored,” he said. “Nobody knew this... That gave me confidence. I wasn't just out there all by myself.”

That Dwight's career was so tied to JFK's ultimately proved a liability. When Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963, all bets were off.

Now there was no one to intercede, if things got ugly. And in the '60s – the era of the Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X assassinations – things could get very ugly.

“I walked up to the flight line one day, getting ready to jump in and get strapped in for a test flight,” he recalled. His crew chief, a 19-year-old Black teen, took him aside and said, “Captain

Dwight, I'm scared.”

“I said, what are you talking about? He said, ‘Two guys came to the flight line yesterday all dressed in black, and they took me out to this room. And they asked me, what would it take – more stripes on your arm, or do you just want money – to fix Captain Dwight's airplane so it doesn't come back?’ I said, ‘That's not a good joke.’ And he started crying. He said, ‘If they could kill you, they could kill me.’”

Dwight refused to fly that day. And he was put on report. Such things – and there were others – drove him to resign from the Air Force in 1966.

“I was told by the top generals and senators, ‘Captain Dwight, we're behind you, and good luck to you, but you're 20 years too soon,’” he recalled.

That estimate was on-the-nose. It wasn't until 1983 that Guy Bluford, flying in the Challenger, became the first African American in space.

Dwight might well have been bitter, but he said he's “not physically or intellectually structured for it. It's not my deal. Everything has a reason for being. Every happening in universal time has the time and the space and the place.”

Dwight's first act was over. But his show was just getting underway.

African American history and culture has been his key preoccupation. He's done upward of 18,000 gallery pieces, and 129 public sculptures, to be found in places like Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington, D.C., the Alex Haley/Kunta Kinte Memorial in Annapolis, Maryland, and the African American History Monument at the South Carolina State House.

Even as Dwight reinvented himself as an artist, he was re-embraced by NASA.

“NASA ended up integrating me,” he said. “They named asteroids after me. I did a lot of art for NASA. They've been very very kind to me.”

He ended up being a mentor to the next generation of Black astronauts. And this past May, he got to fulfill an old dream. After a mere 60-year delay, he got to go into space May 19, a suborbital flight on Blue Origin's New Shepard NS-25. And though years of flight training had told him what to expect, he was still overwhelmed.

That sinking-into-the-seat moment, as a spacecraft launches, is something he'll never forget.

“I was curious about getting (g-force) from the bottom up,” he said. “Being boosted. And the noise! When that big booster kicks in, you know you're going someplace.”

In Paterson, New Jersey, Dwight's sculpture group “On Wings of Freedom” stands at Huntoon and Van Renssaler Underground Railroad Historic Site. Dwight came to personally dedicate it in 2014. And that's where Saturday's Juneteenth event will be staged.

The piece he did for Paterson depicts Josiah Huntoon and William Van Renssaler – white and Black abolitionists – holding aloft the lantern to guide Underground Railroad fugitives to freedom.

“If you look at the monument, it looks like a spacecraft of some sort,” he said. “It looks like it has to do with freedom, and a modern-day escape.”

That's what ties Dwight to the narrative of Juneteenth – that's the story of African Americans whose great freedom day, June 19, 1865, was just one more step on a road that goes on and on.