GEORGE HATCHER

"Three, two, one, ignition, liftoff!" As an aerospace engineer at NASA,* George Hatcher was part of the excitement and tension in the firing room as space shuttles were launched. His passion for space started when he was a kid. He even went to Space Camp at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Alabama. After earning a master's degree in aerospace engineering from the University of Tennessee, he was thrilled to join NASA in 2004. He helps test and maintain space vehicles and prepare them for launch.

In addition to his job, George is working toward a doctorate degree in planetary science. He would love to be an astronaut and explore space himself someday. George hopes to see the growth of space travel for people other than astronauts and even permanent human settlements on the moon and Mars. He says, "We learn stuff about the universe *every day*. It excites me no end . . . It feels like such a privilege to be alive today . . ." George lives in Florida with his wife, Lorenia, not far from the Kennedy Space Center.

Q. What was the most challenging experience for you as a kid, and how did you handle it?

Getting made fun of at school . . . It wasn't easy having an odd name. Everyone was named Michael or Ryan, and I'm named George . . . And then being the only kid that had red hair. And then getting glasses before anybody else did, and getting braces before everybody else did. Not being afraid to answer the teacher's questions in class, being made fun of for being the class nerd and for enjoying school. And kind of being a sensitive kid—not being willing to bully other kids to try to fit in . . .

Then in eighth grade, I said, "You know what? That's it . . ." I made the choice . . . not to care what other people thought about my actions, to do what I thought was right. And that freed me.

Left: At age 11, George went to Space Camp, which heightened his interest in space exploration. **Right:** George was bullied in second grade (top), but he freed himself from bullies in middle school and enjoyed his high school years (bottom).

Q. How did you get interested in the space program?

When I was three years old and my mom gave me an astronaut LEGO set. I can still visualize that tiny little LEGO figure with the astronaut helmet, and building moon bases in my room upstairs. I knew it was something that I wanted to do . . . I was ready to go into the military leaving high school, because I saw that as a pathway to the astronaut corps, being a military pilot . . . And when they said they wouldn't take me because of my eyesight, I had to kind of switch gears . . . So I pursued aerospace engineering.

*U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration

STARGAZER

An interview with an inspirational Bahá'í

Q. What do you love about your job? And what are some of the challenges?

The best part of . . . work on the space shuttle was being with the vehicles . . . whether it was on the shuttle landing facility, which is one of the longest runways in the world; or in the Vehicle Assembly Building, which is that huge one-story 525-foot-tall iconic building . . . One of the coolest things is . . . crawling around inside . . . It's almost like you can feel the hopes and dreams of a country just kind of hanging around . . . Every single time I went up there and stared at the nose of the vehicle, knowing that . . . it's capable of going 25 times faster than a bullet, carrying seven human beings, and all of the things that it does, you know, taking off like a rocket, orbiting like a satellite, and landing like a plane—I had to pinch myself every time I went in there to work on it . . .

But the challenge [is] . . . being vigilant . . . I would have nightmares all the time about . . . accidents. I started work after the Columbia accident . . . I'm in the firing room in the Launch Control Center during countdown and just sweating bullets, wondering if I've done everything that I could to make sure that *my* part was as safe as possible.

Q. Do you believe in intelligent life on other planets?

Without a doubt . . . We've got hundreds of billions of stars in our galaxy alone . . . And there are estimates that . . . the universe itself could be many thousands of times larger than what we can see . . . The conclusion is pretty certain that every star has a planet, and that is the science backing up the [Bahá'í] writings . . . "Every fixed star [hath] its own planets, and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can compute."**

Q. What advice do you have for kids who dream of a career in space?

Maintain that sense of wonder, but work as hard as you can . . . Don't let anybody tell you that you can't do it, whether you're a boy or a girl . . . Know that you can do it if you really want to . . . Education is not something that ever stops . . . To stop learning is to stop living.

Top Left: At the Kennedy Space Center, George jumps high over Launch Pad 39A, where all 12 men who walked on the moon were launched into space atop the Saturn V rocket. **Top Right:** George in NASA's Firing Room 4, during a space shuttle launch in 2006. **Bottom:** George's wife, Lorenia, is an expert interpreter and translator of English, Spanish, and French.

Q. What do you think are important life skills for kids to develop?

Cooperation. We seem to be, in the United States, obsessed with competition. I think that there are places where competition is useful . . . There would be no game if there were no opponent . . . Just coming out on the field together and making the choice to compete within certain rules is a form of cooperation . . . I think that cooperation is a foundation to civilization . . . I try to . . . be as aware of the fundamental unity of humanity as possible.

** A quote from Bahá'u'lláh