Cosmic possibilities: building your space future starts with a dream

For World Space Week, women from across the space industry came together to share their stories, challenge expectations, and remind the next generation that the future of space belongs to all of us.

What did you believe was possible for your life when you were 16?

Did you dream of exploring the universe? Building spacecraft? Becoming an astronaut? Or were you still trying to figure out what your future might look like?

During World Space Week, the Cosmic Girls Foundation brought together an inspiring group of women from across the space sector for **"Cosmic Possibilities: Building Your Space Future."** The conversation explored a powerful idea: the future doesn't simply happen to us. It's something we build together.

Moderated by 2025 Roddenberry Ambassador Sabrina Carton, the panel featured Cosmic Girls Foundation founder Dr. Mindy Howard, astronaut and wellness coach Keisha Schahaf, retired U.S. Space Force Lieutenant General DeAnna Burt, and space communications and outreach specialist Amy Imhoff.

Their experiences were different, but their message was remarkably consistent: **your dream doesn't have to follow a conventional path to become possible.**

Your future can be bigger than your starting point
When asked what they imagined for themselves at 16, the panelists offered a wonderful reminder that there is no single way to dream about the future.

For Mindy Howard, the dream was to go to space — and perhaps marry the Six Million Dollar Man along the way!

For DeAnna Burt, the first goal was to become a college graduate and contribute to making the world a better place. As the first person in her family to attend college, she initially saw the military as a pathway to that education. She never expected it would lead to a 33-year career helping shape the U.S. military's presence in space.

Keisha Schahaf remembers looking up at the stars and wondering what else might exist beyond Earth. She was fascinated by the possibility of extraterrestrial life and dreamed of exploring the universe, even when she couldn't imagine how she might get there.

Amy Imhoff, meanwhile, knew she wanted to explore the world beyond her Pennsylvania suburb. Inspired by science fiction and the possibilities she saw in stories, she gradually

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created a career that brought together digital media, space exploration, and her love of inclusive storytelling.

Their stories remind us that **you don't need to know exactly how your future will unfold to take the first step toward it.**
Sometimes a dream starts with a clear ambition. Sometimes it begins with a question. And sometimes, all you know is that the path laid out in front of you doesn't feel like your own.

That's a perfectly good place to start.

Who gets to decide what's possible?
For many young people, the biggest obstacle isn't a lack of ambition. It's being told - directly or indirectly - that a particular future isn't meant for them.

The panelists reflected on the expectations that shaped their early lives, from traditional gender roles to educational barriers and assumptions about what women could achieve.

DeAnna shared how her father encouraged her to become independent, teaching her practical skills and reinforcing the idea that she could pursue whatever she wanted. That belief helped her navigate environments where women were often underrepresented.

Amy recalled telling her mother as a teenager that she wanted to go to space. Her mother's response was to ask what would happen if her future husband didn't want her to go.
Amy's answer? She would divorce him and go to space.

It was a funny moment, but it illustrated something important: sometimes, building your future means deciding that other people's expectations won't define it.

Keisha's journey offered another perspective. Growing up with dyslexia and learning difficulties, she struggled in an educational environment that didn't always understand how she learned. Being laughed at or punished for her difficulties made learning frightening.
Yet her curiosity about space never disappeared. With encouragement from her grandfather and a willingness to keep believing in her dream, she eventually became one of the first passengers to fly to space with Virgin Galactic, alongside her daughter.
Her message to young people who learn differently was especially powerful: a difficult chapter does not define your whole story.

We all learn differently. We all bring different strengths. And the future of space needs people who think, question, create, and solve problems in different ways.

Rejection is an event, not your identity
Let's talk about something we don't always celebrate enough: not getting picked.

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What happens when you apply for an opportunity and someone else gets it? When you work hard toward a goal and the answer is no? When the future you've imagined suddenly looks further away?

For Mindy, rejection has been a recurring part of her pursuit of spaceflight. She came close to being selected as a NASA astronaut candidate, reaching the final 200 applicants, but wasn't selected. She later explored opportunities with the European Space Agency, only to discover that she was outside its age limit at the time.
Even when a commercial spaceflight opportunity seemed to be within reach, the pandemic disrupted her plans.
These experiences hurt. But they didn't make her dream smaller.

Instead, Mindy continued looking for new ways to contribute to the space industry. That journey ultimately helped inspire the creation of Cosmic Girls Foundation - an organization dedicated to helping girls explore their potential and pursue their own ambitions.

What if a rejection isn't the end of your story? What if it becomes the beginning of something you couldn't have imagined before?

DeAnna shared a similar perspective from her military career. Some of the positions she wanted didn't work out, but the opportunities that followed often turned out to be more rewarding than the original plans.

Amy also described how losing a corporate job opened the door to freelance work, teaching, new professional connections, and opportunities to contribute to the space sector in ways she hadn't previously considered.

And Keisha reminded us that failure can be a source of growth, even when it doesn't feel that way at first.

Of course, rejection isn't easy. It can be disappointing, frustrating, and deeply personal. You are allowed to feel those emotions. Resilience doesn't mean pretending that something doesn't hurt.

It means giving yourself time to process what happened, seeking support when you need it, and deciding what comes next.

As Mindy explained, non-selection is an event - not your identity.

Not getting this opportunity doesn't mean you aren't capable. It means this opportunity didn't work out. Your future is still being written.

You don't have to be the smartest person in the room
During the audience Q&A, one question prompted an immediate response from the panel:

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What if I'm not the smartest person in the room?
The answer came quickly: So what?

You don't have to know everything to belong in a room. You don't have to be the best at everything to contribute something meaningful.

In fact, DeAnna offered an important reminder: if you believe you're the smartest person in every room, you may not be putting yourself in situations where you can continue learning. Throughout her career, she saw the value of preparation, curiosity, and being willing to listen. Leadership isn't about knowing everything. It's about learning continuously, asking better questions, and helping others succeed.

The same principle applies to space careers.
Space exploration is a team effort. Behind every mission are engineers, scientists, programmers, technicians, communicators, designers, project managers, and countless other people whose contributions make success possible.

You don't need to know everything today. You need to remain curious about what you can learn tomorrow.

And if you're the person who brings a different perspective to the discussion, don't underestimate its value.

The power of seeing yourself in space
Science fiction has long offered visions of futures that don't yet exist. For Amy, stories about women in leadership - from *Star Trek* to *The X-Files* - helped her imagine possibilities beyond traditional expectations.
But representation isn't only about seeing women as astronauts or captains on screen. It's also about showing the people and pathways behind real space missions.

Amy spoke about her work on NASA's Interstellar Mapping and Acceleration Probe (IMAP) mission, which brought together hundreds of people working across a decade to develop a spacecraft with ten scientific instruments.
These are the stories she wants more people to hear: the stories of the scientists, engineers, communicators, and other professionals whose collective work makes space exploration possible.

The women balancing demanding careers with family life. The people pursuing unconventional career paths. The teams working through setbacks, solving complex problems, and celebrating a mission that took years to bring to life.

Space isn't just a destination. It's an entire ecosystem of people, ideas, and possibilities.

And there is room for more of us in it.

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As Amy highlighted through the Star Trek principle of *Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations*, diversity includes not only who we are but also how we think, what we experience, and what we bring to the table.

The future of space will benefit from all of those perspectives.

Your dream doesn't have to look like anyone else's
One of the most powerful aspects of this conversation was how differently each panelist arrived at her place in the space sector.

DeAnna's path began with a college education and developed into a distinguished military career. Amy combined communications, digital media, science outreach, and science fiction fandom. Keisha's journey connected wellness, motherhood, curiosity, and commercial spaceflight. Mindy's pursuit of her own space dream helped her build an organization to support the dreams of others.
There was no single blueprint.

That matters because young people often see only the most visible space careers. They might assume that the only way to contribute is to become an astronaut, study a particular subject, or follow a prescribed route through education and training.

But space needs people with many different skills.

If you're interested in astrobiology, for example, scientific study and research experience can help you build a foundation. Depending on your interests, fieldwork, programming, laboratory work, communication, teamwork, and leadership can also be valuable.

If you're fascinated by the human side of space exploration, you might explore psychology, human factors, wellness, education, policy, or mission operations.

If you love storytelling, art, media, or community-building, there are opportunities to help people understand why space exploration matters and to connect new audiences with the discoveries being made.

Your interests don't have to fit neatly into one category. Sometimes, the most interesting career paths emerge where different passions intersect.

And if you're not sure what your path looks like yet, you are not behind. You're exploring.

Building a future together
A recurring theme throughout the panel was the importance of community.

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Mindy created Cosmic Girls Foundation because she understands how difficult it can be to pursue a dream without the right support. She also knows that young people need more than stories of success. They need to hear about the setbacks, disappointments, and unexpected turns along the way.

They need mentors who can help them see a different possibility. They need people who encourage them to keep going without pretending the journey will always be easy.

They need spaces where they can ask questions, discover their strengths, and learn from people whose experiences differ from their own.

And they need to know that their worth isn't determined by a selection committee, a school grade, a job title, or how quickly they reach a particular milestone.

The future of space is something we build together — by opening doors, sharing knowledge, celebrating different perspectives, and making opportunities accessible to more people.

That's the spirit behind Cosmic Girls Foundation.

Your cosmic possibilities start now

If there's one message we'd like young people to take away from this World Space Week conversation, it's this:

You don't need to have everything figured out.
You don't need to be the smartest person in the room.
You don't need to follow someone else's timeline.
And you don't need to let one rejection decide what you're capable of achieving.

You can be curious. You can change your mind. You can ask for help. You can take a break when things get difficult. You can try again, or discover a completely different way forward.

Your future might look different from what you imagined when you were 16. It might take longer than you expected. It might lead you somewhere you never knew existed.

That doesn't make your dream any less meaningful.

The universe is vast, and our possibilities are still expanding. The next generation of space explorers, innovators, scientists, leaders, artists, and changemakers will bring ideas and perspectives that we cannot yet imagine.

At Cosmic Girls Foundation, we believe every girl deserves the opportunity to explore those possibilities.

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Dream big. Stay curious. Learn from the setbacks. And remember: your story is still unfolding.

The future of space needs you.

Cosmic Girls Foundation empowers girls to explore their potential, discover opportunities in the space sector, and build the confidence to pursue their own cosmic possibilities.

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