

# REACH FOR THE STARS

## JOSE HERNANDEZ STORY



**Narrator:** In the farm fields of Southern California under the hot, smouldering sun, you find children of migrant farm workers helping their parents. These families endure the hard work and low pay of harvesting crops in hopes of providing a better future for their children. This is the story of a child who dared to dream big despite his humble beginnings.

Jose Hernandez was born in French Camp, California in 1962. He is the youngest of four children. His parents were migrant farm workers who would follow the harvest to provide for their family.

**Jose Hernandez:** It was interesting growing up as a kid. I was very exciting. It's the only life I knew, so I didn't know I was ... Had it so rough. We used to spend nine months out of the year in California following the harvest from southern to northern California, and of course, you're in three different school districts, at least three different school districts, and then

you go back to Mexico for three months. You take homework from here and you do it over there. Not a very conducive environment to get a good education.

Narrator: At the urging of his second grade teacher, the Hernandez family settles in Stockton, California.

Jose Hernandez: That's when our education began to get traction and that's when we started to learn a lot and become more proficient in English.

Narrator: Aside from attending school, Jose, like all children of migrant farm workers, had to help in the fields. Jose recalls what his father told him after a long and tiring day of picking crops.

Jose Hernandez: He said, "I'm not gonna make you go to school. I'm not gonna make you get straight A's in school, but if you ever wonder what life is without an education, you have the distinct privilege of living your future now. 'Cause this is it. Welcome to the future. This is your future without an education."

Narrator: In 1972, the live television broadcast of Apollo 17 landing a man on the moon made a profound impression on 10-year-old Jose.

Jose Hernandez: That's when it really hit me. I said, "This is what I want to do. I want to be an astronaut when I grow up." That evening, I shared that dream with my father.

Narrator: Instead of discouraging Jose from such a big dream, his father gave him hope.

Jose Hernandez: He said, "First, mi hijo, you have to decide what you want to be in life." I said, "I want to be an astronaut." Figure one out of five, I'm almost there. "Second," he said, "You've gotta recognise how far you are from there." I said, "Well," I thought to myself, "I can't be any farther than this. I'm the son of a migrant farm worker." No offence, but that was reality. He said, "Third, you've gotta draw yourself a road map from where you know where you're at to where you

know you wanna go, 'cause that's what's gonna guide you in life to reach your goal." I said, "What's the fourth one, papa?" He said, "You're doing it already, mi hijo. You've gotta stay in school. No substitute for an education. Fifth and final," he said, he pointed outside says, "You know that effort you put out working the fields every Saturday and Sunday, seven days a week during the summer? You know that hard work you put in there?" I said, "Si, papa." He pointed to my books on the kitchen table. He said, "You put it here."

**Narrator:** Jose believed in his father's advice, but living in the barrio was not very conducive for a young boy's dreams and aspirations.

**Jose Hernandez:** I used to be very good friends with three individuals that one committed suicide and another one overdosed and the other one is still running around in the streets. Up to probably not good things and yet, these were my true friends when I grew up as a kid. It's the parental guidance that makes the biggest difference in the world.

**Narrator:** After graduating high school, Jose majors in electrical engineering at the University of the Pacific in Stockton and pursues graduate studies at the University of California.

**Jose Hernandez:** My parents, they didn't have the opportunity to get an education and so they did everything in their power to make sure we were afforded that opportunity.

**Narrator:** Jose lands a job with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in 1987. There, he helps develop the first full field digital mammography imaging system. It was a tremendous breakthrough in the field of early detection of cancer.

**Jose Hernandez:** That's the one I'm most proud of, because I know that this device that we developed, we co-developed in at Lawrence Livermore Lab, I know that this device has saved lives.

Narrator: In 1992, in pursuit of his dream to become an astronaut, Jose applies to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA, but his application is denied.

Jose Hernandez: I got rejected six times in a row and I remember the sixth letter I crumpled and I threw it in the bedroom and of course my wife was picking up the bedroom and she read this. She undid it from the ball that I had wrinkled it and read it and she said, "What's this?" I said, "Well, NASA rejected me again for the sixth time," I said, "I think I'm gonna give up." She looked at me and said, "That doesn't sound like you."

Narrator: Jose's biggest cheerleader was his wife. With her encouragement, Jose improves his qualifications by becoming a pilot, certified scuba diver, and a marathon runner. Jose also goes to work for NASA as an engineer, hoping to improve his chances of being selected an astronaut.

On February 1st, 2003, the unthinkable happens. The space shuttle Columbia breaks apart while reentering the atmosphere over Texas killing all seven crew members on board.

Jose Hernandez: It was our group that was instrumental in helping find what that root cause was, which was a piece of foam that hit the leading edge of the wing making a hole during ascent. Then, of course, during entry, that hot plasma went in and basically melted the aluminium frame of the wing that caused that catastrophic failure. But it was our group that helped out in that and I think that gave me the exposure so that when for the third time I was in the final 100, the 12th year of applying, that was when I finally got selected and became part of the 19th class of astronauts in 2004.

Narrator: In 2009, after years of training, Jose flew aboard space shuttle Discovery as a mission specialist. Jose, together with six other astronauts, were to deliver needed supplies and science equipment to the International Space Station.

Jose Hernandez: I remember pushing myself and saying, "The first thing I want to do is I want to see the world." What struck me as beautiful was the fact that you couldn't make out where Canada ended and the US began. You look further down south, you couldn't make out where the US ended and Mexico began and so on and so forth and I said, "Wow!" We ... I had to go out of this world to get that a-ha moment that borders our human made concepts and wouldn't it be a great idea to get all our world leaders to get that same a-ha moment, because I'll assure you that if we did, our world would be a much more peaceful place than it is today.

Narrator: After 15 days in space, Discovery landed just a few miles from where Jose grew up picking strawberries. Returning home, Jose had successfully completed his space mission and fulfilled a very special childhood dream.

Jose now heads a foundation called Reaching for the Stars, which is to inspire kids to dream the impossible and to emphasise that through education, anything is possible. He also wrote his autobiography, Reaching for the Stars. The story of a migrant farm worker turned astronaut.

Jose's parents, Salvador and Julia, now live comfortably on a small farm that Jose helped to acquire. Both are very proud of their son's accomplishments.