



■ ISN'T THAT...

DANCING ON THE CEILING

Ground control to 'May-jah' Tom... Chris Cassidy, Maine's first astronaut, dreams of launching into a very public space.

INTERVIEW BY COLIN SARGENT

Houston, we have a malfunction. It seems one of our astronauts down here has a *Maine accent*!

Reached for a chat at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Lieutenant Commander Chris Cassidy, 36, Navy SEAL and decorated veteran of two tours in Afghanistan, is delightfully down to earth while awaiting a trip to the stars.

Tell us about high school, sports, growing up.

I was quarterback in football, played first base in baseball, and was a shooting forward in basketball. I graduated from York High in 1988.

Where might we have seen you back then?

I spent hours and hours playing basketball on the outdoor court at Short Sands Beach in Maine, right next to the Goldenrod. I mowed a lot of lawns in York and York Beach.

Some of your wealthy summer clients will read this and exclaim, "Chloe, our gardener is now an astronaut!" How much did they pay you?

Back in those days, I'd charge 20 to 25 bucks for a lawn. I worked for a group of guys and used their equipment. Then I got my own equipment and had my own lawns.

Then it was off to the Naval Academy?

In my junior year of high school, I was looking at college options and realized it was expensive. It dawned on me that somebody has to pay for this. Then I read the Naval Academy was free.

You can't just select 'astronaut' on service selection right at the Naval Academy, can you?

On service selection night I picked SEALS. [In his 10 years as a SEAL, Cassidy made four six-month deployments. He was a ground assault force commander in Afghanistan, and served in the Northern Arabian Gulf.]

Plenty of us are spacey in the Pine Tree State. But are you truly the only Mainer who's an astronaut?

I think so. But there's another connection. [Fellow astronaut] Ken Hamm's parents live near Portland or Brunswick, I think. There must be other connections, though. Four thousand people come through the gate every day here at Johnson Space Center. Of them, roughly 100 are astronauts working here. Just fewer than half of that 100 have not flown in space. My half is obviously in that pile. In the meantime you

get assigned to different programs. I'm a crew-support astronaut for an international space station crew that's going to launch in a year and a half.

But you won't be going with them.

No. When they're in orbit, I'll be in daily contact with them, I'm liaison for them on their whole process to provide continuity. I've trained with them and know their situation, their families. It's my job to represent them from here throughout their flight.

So people are forever asking you, "When are you going to launch?" Does it drive you crazy?

The time line here is in years. There aren't that many flights! I'm guessing, but I'd be surprised if the first folks in my class flew before 2010.

So what do you say to people who just don't get it?

My answer is, it seems like a long line to be in, but it's the right line to be in.

In the meantime, there are interviews like this and Mainers who hound you to come up here and speak at the local Kiwanis Club luncheon?

When I first got selected in the summer of 2004, I was asked to speak at the York High graduation and was very excited about it, but it turned out the very same day was when the movers were coming to Norfolk to move us to Houston, and there was so much chaos I couldn't make it happen. I felt really lousy not being able to do it.

When were you in Maine last?

I got home from a six-month deployment in Afghanistan and got to visit Maine that same year.

How'd you meet your wife?

I met Julie while I was at the Naval Academy. Her brother was my good friend there. As a plebe I'd go to his house, right in Frederick, Maryland. On a Saturday I'd go over to their house to hang out and have real food. We fell in love then. We have three children, two daughters and a son.

We have a great picture of you in zero gravity. But even that seems to bring home your bizarre sense of suspension: In a way, you are up in the air, waiting to go up in the air.

There's so much to train for in the meantime that it doesn't seem like waiting in a sense. We're up in T-38s, we're in space simulators; one week I might have a space

shuttle simulator simulating the ascent or a space station simulating the tasks, or be in the back of a T-38 for mission training.

The zero-gravity picture was taken in a



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C-9 that does 40 parabolas from 40,000 to 10,000 feet to let us train for 20 seconds in zero gravity. It's called the *Vomit Comet*.

Strike my next question. It was going to be, where do you like to eat in Maine?

I love Flo's Hot Dogs on Route 1. And by the way, lobster wins by far over Tex-Mex.

You must think about Christa MacAuliffe given your home turf. Where exactly were you during her tragedy with her crew?

I was in York High School, walking in the hall. They had it on TV. I remember walking by and stopping in between classes and watching it on a rolling cart in the cafeteria. That was sad. At that point, it didn't register so much that she was a New Englander. But a sense of that has grown since then.

Even astronauts have chores at home, don't they? Think Jack Nicholson in *Terms of Endearment*.

When I go home at night I do things like home improvement. Normal stuff. Last night I installed and wired a cable network [for our entertainment system]. But tonight, I'm playing on the astronaut softball team.

So how did you guys fake the moon landing?
[Laughs] Next question.

What would Mainers be surprised to learn about you personally?

That I've acclimated to the heat! The whole first summer here was really hot. Now I get chilly here in Houston when it's in the 50s. My Maine friends would laugh. ■