

REACHING FOR THE STARS: APOLLO 11 ANNIVERSARY BRINGS BACK SPECIAL MEMORIES FOR HOUSTON METHODIST CLEAR LAKE VOLUNTEER

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As a volunteer at [Houston Methodist Clear Lake Hospital](#), George Richeson often helps patients and visitors navigate their way around the campus. With a friendly smile and well-rehearsed directions, he makes sure they get where they need to be.

Helping people get to the right place at the right time is one of his favorite volunteer tasks. It's a skill Richeson honed during the heady days of the Apollo space program, when he worked at NASA as a member of the Landing & Recovery team – coordinating with the U.S. Navy to ensure that the astronauts were promptly picked up in the ocean after their spacecraft returned to Earth.

Richeson served on the team for four historic flights, including Apollo 11, when astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon. During that flight, Richeson was stationed in the Recovery Operations Control Room, which sat adjacent to Mission Control, where he had an up-close view of history being made.

“It was an incredible experience,” Richeson recalls. “We were all so thrilled and relieved after splashdown, when we knew the crew was home safely. We broke out the flags and celebrated. It was a privilege to be a part of that team.”

Richeson's favorite mission was Apollo 8 in 1968, when he was deployed to Oahu, Hawaii for 17 days to help plan and implement recovery efforts.

“It was just a memorable mission for so many reasons,” Richeson said. “It was the first manned orbit of the moon and of course, living near Waikiki Beach was definitely special. I remember walking outside one night and looking up at the moon, and it just hit me – we've got guys orbiting up there. I was just in awe of that.”

The astronauts' Christmas Eve message – a reading of Genesis from the Bible – also stands out.

“That was just so inspiring,” he said.

Besides the scenery, there was another benefit to being stationed in Hawaii. Richeson remembers going to a grocery store in Oahu and stocking up on frozen dinners so he could save his per diem allowance.

“I came back from Hawaii with money in my pocket,” he joked.

When the Apollo program ended, Richeson worked on data and software projects for Skylab, the Space Shuttle program and then the International Space Station before retiring in 2001.

The 50th anniversary of Apollo 11 has given Richeson a chance to reflect on his long career at NASA, and even reconnect with some of his former colleagues. Today, he enjoys teaching literacy and volunteering at Houston Methodist Clear Lake, where he often reminisces with another space program veteran who volunteers, Pete Braccio.

Braccio worked for Philco-Ford, the NASA contractor that designed and built the consoles and communication equipment for Mission Control.

“Pete was there at the very beginning,” Richeson said. “Whenever we aren’t helping people find their way or offering support to someone who needs a friendly face, we like to swap stories about the early days.”

For more information on becoming a volunteer at Houston Methodist Clear Lake Hospital, visit houstonmethodist.org/volunteer or call 281.523.2033.