STENNIS SPACE CENTER

Profiles in Leadership

Michael Tubbs
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Growing up on the East Coast, Michael Tubbs wanted to be Bruce Springsteen. He imagined playing a yellow Fender Telecaster guitar and dancing with Courtney Cox in music videos, just like Springsteen did. “Turns out, I have no rhythm, I cannot sing, and I cannot dance," Tubbs said. Pursuing a new direction, with the hope of inspiring young minds and helping change the world in some small way, Tubbs earned a bachelor’s degree in English from the College of William & Mary. He then entered the field of education and became a teacher. Eventually, Tubbs launched a NASA career, serving in multiple roles. He previously served as deputy director of the Center Operations Directorate at NASA’s Ames Research Center and as a communication specialist for the NASA Shared Services Center before joining the NASA Stennis Center Operations team.

How did you end up working for NASA?

There is nothing wrong with going to work to earn a living and provide a better life for your family. That is an honorable pursuit, but I always wanted something more. My dream for my work life was to be part of something bigger than myself, something that would have a lasting impact on the world. I wanted to inspire others and make them believe more was possible than they dared to dream. I wanted to change the world in some small part. So, I became a teacher. Each year, I was given the opportunity to influence and inspire a new set of young minds. It was powerful and rewarding. Teaching was a job I loved, and I felt that I did change the world, in some small part, and that my work did carry on into the world through the students I helped to educate. I was satisfied. A career change was never in my mind, but like many folks on the coast, Hurricane Katrina changed everything. I was new to Mississippi, and I needed work. Schools were still closed, and I had bills to pay. I was stunned to get a job offer as a support contractor at NASA. I did not understand then just how fortunate I was. I had been fanatical about the agency since I was a young boy, but never realized they would have a purpose for me. In my mind, the job would be temporary. Schools would reopen, and I would be back in my classroom. However, I fell head over heels in love with the agency. Suddenly, everything I dreamed to accomplish in a classroom, I was working towards on a greater scale than I dreamed possible at NASA. On top of that, I soon learned how applicable the skills that make up the art and science of teaching were in the NASA environment. The NASA bug bit me, and I quickly knew I was going to live with that sting. The journey that followed has been one of my life’s greatest blessings.

What is your advice for someone looking for career growth or a leadership role?

My advice to others is to be open to walking through doors that unexpectedly open for you. Creating a plan and a set of career goals is a healthy exercise, but you should never narrowly define your abilities and inadvertently limit what is possible for you. For instance, I tell NASA colleagues that no matter your expertise, skill set, or talent, you are first and foremost, a NASA employee, and NASA employees can do just about anything. That is why you are here. Have that mind set. This agency does an amazing job utilizing diverse talent across a broad spectrum of responsibilities. Do not typecast yourself in a specific job or field.

Looking ahead, what are you most excited to see for the agency and Stennis?

I believe we stand at the precipice of a new space age, one where our species will live, work, and explore beyond Earth. Commercial enterprise will build new economies, scientists and researchers will make new discoveries, and our understanding of who we are and our place in the universe will likely change. Missions launching now are the product of years of work. I believe the fruits of that labor will be surprising and wonderful. As it has been since its inception, Stennis remains crucial to the national space enterprise. I am excited to work with new and old partners in industry who bring creative and innovative solutions to market. I long to see our return to the Moon and to watch that moment knowing the engines that made it possible first roared to life where I work. How cool is that!

What will you most fondly remember about your career?

Without a doubt, I will remember people the most. So many of them are so integral to who I am. I spent five years at Ames Research Center, where I made connections that will last a lifetime. In my time at the NSSC and Stennis, I have made friends and found a work family I cherish.