



RNASA
ROTARY NATIONAL AWARD
FOR SPACE ACHIEVEMENT

For Immediate Release

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RNASA's 2026 Stellar Award Winners Announced

Houston, Texas (May 1, 2026). The Rotary National Award for Space Achievement (**RNASA**) Foundation honored the dedication of the space workers at the annual Space Awards Gala on Friday, April 24, 2026, by presenting the Rotary National Award for Space Achievement (RNASA) Stellar Awards.

Every year, the aerospace community anxiously awaits the announcement of the Rotary National Award for Space Achievement (RNASA) Stellar Award winners.

The 2026 Stellar Awards Evaluation Panel, **Michael Coats, Kevin Chilton, Sandra Magnus, Charles Elachi, and Michael Hawes** ranked the nominees based on which accomplishments have advanced U.S. space capabilities and hold the greatest promise of future capabilities.

Out of **138** nominations received, the Panel selected **20** individuals and **7** teams for recognition.

Prior to the evening's festivities, with coordination with **Space Center Houston** and the **NASA External Relations Office**, all nominees were treated to a behind-the-scenes tour of the Johnson Space Center and a luncheon at the **Great Wolf Lodge**. Stellar Awards Committee Chair **Rubik Sheth**, RNASA Foundation Chair **Rodolfo González**, and former Space Center Rotary President **John Branch** welcomed the nominees at the luncheon, and Orion Program Manager, **Howard Hu**, provided a keynote discussion about Artemis II.

Each nominee received a **Fisher Space Pen** donated by the company. The **Fisher Space Pen** was originally carried by the astronauts of the Apollo moon missions and is still used on manned space flights to this day. They are precision assembled, hand tested, and guaranteed to perform underwater, at any angle including upside down, in extreme temperatures, and of course in zero gravity.

The Stellar Award winners were announced at the RNASA evening gala on April 24, 2026 by astronaut **Anne McClain** and astronaut **Nichole Ayers** who presented them with engraved marble trophies. The winners in each of the four categories, Early Career, Mid Career, Late Career and Team are:

Board of Advisors

Albaugh, James F.
Aldridge, Edward C.
Altman, Scott D.
Bolden, Charles F.
Brandenstein, Dan
Cabana, Robert D.
Cain, LeRoy E.
Callahan, Lisa
Campbell, Donald J.
Carr, Jeffrey E.
Carreau, Mark E.
Cazes, David
Chilton, Kevin P.
Coats, Michael L.
Collins, Eileen M.
Cottrhan, Brad
Covey, Richard O.
Crippen, Robert
Culbertson, Frank L.
Dittmore, Ronald D.
Elachi, Charles
Elbon, John W.
Flynt, G. Allen
Free, James M.
Freedman, Brian D.
Fuqua, Donald
Gerstenmaier, William H.
Griffin, Gerald D.
Griffin, Michael D.
Grunsfeld, John M.
Hawes, W. Michael
Heftlin, J. Milt
Hendershot, Cynthia
Hernandez, Jorge
Hieb, Richard J.
Holloway, Tommy W.
Hutchinson, Neil B.
Hutchison, Kay Bailey
Johnson, Sandra G.
Karas, John C.
Kavandi, Janet L.
Kranz, Eugene F.
Kropp, Debbie
Lightfoot, Robert
Lillard, Randolph
Magnus, Sandra H.
May, Todd A.
McBride, David D.
Melroy, Pamela A.
Meyerson, Robert E.
Nemeth, Paul
Nield, George C.
O'Brien, Miles
Ochoa, Ellen
Parsons, William W.
Pickens, Thomas B.
Readdy, William F.
Reightler, Kenneth S.
Schmitt, Harrison H.
Scolese, Christopher J.
Shaw, Brewster H.
Shotwell, Gwynne
Sirangelo, Mark N.
Staples, William A.
Stegemoeller, Charles M.
Stephens, Richard D.
Suffredini, Michael
Swallow, Edward M.
Thompson, David W.
Vantine, William
Wagner, Elizabeth
Wyche, Vanessa E.



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2026 Stellar Award Winners Early Career Category



L to R: Anne McClain (presenting), Dr. Lawrence Barrett, Salome Pajon, Dr. Julia Briden, Dr. Ashwin P. Rao, Reeanna Brown, Nichole Ayers (presenting)

Dr. Lawrence Barrett of Amentum - Exceptional technical leadership, innovation, and dedication to advancing NASA's mission across multiple programs and platforms.

Salome Pajon of United States Space Force - Exceptional leadership in accelerating a critical space program worth \$9B, saving millions and securing a strategic advantage for decades to come.

Dr. Julia Briden of Amentum - Exceptional contributions to advanced mission design, GN&C systems, and software engineering supporting Artemis, Orion, and future planetary missions.

Dr. Ashwin P. Rao of United States Air Force - Outstanding development of disruptive test capabilities and revolutionary technologies for next-generation nuclear deterrence.

Reeanna Brown of Lockheed Martin - Exemplary system safety leadership across critical Orion subsystems, identifying and mitigating high severity risks to significantly enhance crew safety and mission assurance.



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2026 Stellar Award Winners Mid Career Category



L to R: Nichole Ayers (presenting), Dr. Julie C. Smith, Krystal Puga, Branelle Rodriguez, Jodi Zareski, Forrest G. Vaughn, Julieta A. Ventura, Colin Sipe, Daniel Telisky, Debra A. O'Connell, Andrew Cooke, Anne McClain (presenting)

Dr. Julie C. Smith of United States Space Force - Pioneering efforts in laser communications that have forged the foundation for today's interconnected space architectures.

Krystal Puga of Northrop Grumman - Dynamic technical leadership in HALO, advancing human spaceflight and nurturing the next generation of engineers.

Branelle Rodriguez of NASA Johnson Space Center - Unparalleled leadership of Orion vehicle integration and problem resolution, resulting in successful spacecraft delivery for Artemis II.

Jodi Zareski of Lockheed Martin - Exceptional systems leadership on OSIRIS-REx and OSIRIS-APEX, integrating complex subsystems and proactively resolving constraints to ensure sustained mission performance and science return.



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Forrest G. Vaughn of L3Harris / Aerojet Rocketdyne Segment - Exceptional leadership in revolutionizing RS-25 turbopump manufacturing through the development of breakthrough 3D printing technology with dissolvable build supports, enabling production of previously impossible complex geometries while achieving significant cost savings and ensuring the future success of America's deep space exploration programs.

Julieta A. Ventura of Nexus Solutions - Significant contributions to flight hardware certification, failure analysis, and team development.

Colin Sipe of Lockheed Martin - Exemplary leadership and mission-advancing innovation in Orion ground operations, delivering safety-critical solutions that strengthened Lockheed Martin's human spaceflight programs.

Daniel Telisky of Amentum - Outstanding structural and mechanism expertise and guidance for the ISS, Orion, Dream Chaser and Axiom module commercial space station.

Debra A. O'Connell of KBR - Exceptional preparation of Boeing's Crew Flight Test mission and transformative leadership across ISS, Commercial Crew and Artemis programs.

Andrew Cooke of Axiom Space - Deep commitment to advancing human spaceflight through innovative legal strategies and global collaboration, laying the groundwork for a thriving commercial space economy.



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2026 Stellar Award Winners Late Career Category



L to R: Anne McClain (presenting), Grant Slusser, Dr. Madeleine L. Naudeau, Chris S. Strong, Jonathan L. Homan, Nichole Ayers (presenting). Not pictured: Matt Cox

Grant Slusser of KBR - Unparalleled leadership and dedication in elevating mission success across more than one hundred Shuttle, ISS, Commercial Crew, and Artemis missions.

Dr. Madeleine L. Naudeau of United States Space Force - Groundbreaking achievements in advancing space communications and positioning, navigation, and timing capabilities for the United States.

Chris S. Strong of CACI International - Exceptional contributions as an outstanding human spaceflight spacecraft systems and flight software engineer.

Jonathan L. Homan of NASA Johnson Space Center - Exceptional dedication and technical excellence of high-risk large-scale vehicles and human-in-the-loop chamber tests.

Matt Cox of Lockheed Martin - Sustained technical leadership across Orion and multiple landmark NASA missions, overseeing systems and software development that has been foundational to Artemis and long-standing human and robotic spaceflight programs.



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2026 Stellar Award Winners Stellar Team Category



L to R: Nichole Ayers (presenting), Timothy Wright (Thermal Protection System Facility), Jennifer Rocca (Spectro-Photometer for the History of the Universe, Epoch of Reionization and Ices Explorer Team), Jamie S. Womack (Materials and Processes Team), Tony Foti (Cygnus XL Northrop Grumman-23 Team), Jason Kim and Will Coogan (Blue Ghost Mission 1 Team), Christopher Hare (JSC Engineering Data and Information Integration Team), Alex J. Jordan (Artemis Vortex Issue Resolution Team), Anne McClain (presenting).

Thermal Protection System Facility (TPSF) of Amentum - Outstanding accomplishment providing critical thermal protection systems for Shuttle, commercial, and Orion customers for over 40 years, protecting space vehicles and crews.

Spectro-Photometer for the History of the Universe, Epoch of Reionization and Ices Explorer (SPHEREx) Team of Jet Propulsion Laboratory - Successful development and launch of the SPHEREx mission.

Materials and Processes Team of NASA Johnson Space Center - Exceptional dedication, proactive problem-solving, and critical contributions to safeguarding the integrity of ISS modules and future space missions.



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Cygnus XL Northrop Grumman-23 Team of Northrop Grumman - Exceptional achievement in advancing the launch schedule of the Cygnus XL NG-23 mission while delivering critical cargo to the International Space Station.

Blue Ghost Mission 1 Team of Firefly Aerospace - Outstanding team accomplishment in completing the first successful commercial Moon landing in March 2025.

JSC Engineering Data and Information Integration (JEDII) Team of Amentum - Outstanding achievement modernizing and unifying NASA's data infrastructure for managing the lifecycle of JSC engineering projects from cradle to grave.

Artemis Vortex Issue Resolution Team (AVIRT) of The Boeing Company - Successful resolution of a significant Space Launch System (SLS) program in-flight anomaly, enabling the Artemis II mission Certification of Flight readiness for NASA's first manned flight to lunar orbit since the 1970s.

Visit <http://www.rnasa.org/photos.html> for images from the event.

The Rotary National Award for Space Achievement (RNASA) Foundation's black-tie Gala on April 24, 2026, was recorded live, in its entirety, by Space City Films and is accessible on the website's agenda page, www.rnasa.org/agenda.html.