

Astronaut lands in Bisbee

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BISBEE — Astronaut Mark Kelly landed in Bisbee at the Copper Queen Library Thursday afternoon and was promptly greeted by children wearing space helmets and a cheering crowd of parents and locals.

It was a welcome break from the campaign trail.

Kelly spent an hour at the library as part of the Summer Reading Program talking about his adventures in space and reading from his book “Mousetronaut,” a New York Times best seller.

He made four trips in the space shuttle in 2001 and 2006 as the pilot, and in 2008 and 2011 as commander. His last mission was also the last mission of the Endeavor, now housed in Los Angeles.

His time in the U.S. Navy was spent learning to fulfill his dream of being a pilot, though it was not without hard work and determination.

“It doesn’t matter how good you are at the beginning. You can be one of the best if you keep trying,” he told the crowd.

He enthusiastically explained what it was like to lift off into space with 7.8 million pounds of thrust and at a velocity that takes the ship from zero to almost 18,000 miles an hour in a matter of minutes.

Coming back down was just as thrilling, as friction created heat of over 5,000 degrees. “You’re riding a ball of fire. And you have to land at Kennedy Space Station in Florida. You know, there is water on either side of the runway, a long, long runway. And, do know what lives in the water?”

In unison the kids yelled, “Alligators.”

He joked, “That’s right. NASA wanted us to be motivated to land.”

His book, “The Mousetronaut,” is based on an experiment with mice who traveled with him into space and up to the International Space Station. The mice were given a drug to see how it would help with osteoporosis. While the mice held onto the cage for stability, one mouse seemed to enjoy weightlessness, continued Kelly. The little mouse was the inspiration for his book.

Though a second dream of his to walk on Mars will go unfulfilled, he encouraged the children to study hard and become scientists, engineers or doctors.

“All of you have a better chance of going to Mars than me. I’m too old. You could be the commander of the first ship to Mars. You need to keep reading, learn math. I was not always good at math, but I studied and began to like it. Just don’t give up.”

He was asked a number of science questions — what’s a black hole, how big is the universe, how many stars are there and did he see any aliens. He had answers for them all, including one on the experiment between him and his twin brother Scott who spent the longest time in space on the space station, 520 days. Kelly said there were some differences in their microbiology, the genes and telomeres when compared. The gene expression had changed.

As for space junk, that can be a day-to-day problem, he said. Thousands of pieces of space junk orbit the earth. Objects down to the size of a quarter are tracked and monitored. A piece of junk that small can create a catastrophe.

When asked what his favorite planet was, he replied “Earth. It’s amazing to look back and see this round ball. We literally live on an island in space. There is no other place for us. We have to do a better job of taking care of our home.”