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Accident doesn't dampen spirit for space

By Shawna Sundin

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An Orange Park teen's longtime dream of flying into space hasn't changed in light of yesterday's space shuttle disaster.

"Even with this I would still totally love to go into space," said Emily Piatt, a sophomore at Orange Park Christian Academy. "As sad as it is that these people died, it's so cool that they got to go up there."

The 17-year-old learned that the Columbia space shuttle had disintegrated over Texas on its way to Cape Canaveral when her parents woke her up yesterday morning in haste.

"They said, 'the Columbia blew up.' So I got up and read about it on the Internet," she said. "I can't believe it blew up."

Piatt is involved in a program in which she and other students are trying to build a bio-reactor they hope will one day be used for bone-mass experiments on a shuttle. She and other students visited with scientists last year at the Kennedy Space Center to talk about their project.

"I equate it to a military operation," said Jacksonville attorney David Abraham, as he ate lunch in San Marco. "People go into something knowing they're risking their lives. Everyone involved in the space shuttle program goes up knowing if the slightest thing goes wrong, they may not come back." News coverage of the tragedy filled television screens in restaurants and stores across Jacksonville yesterday but few people were watching very intently.

"It's strange, there's not much reaction," said Steve Bennett, manager of Sneakers Sports Grille on Atlantic Boulevard. "Most of my employees are 18, 19, 20 and they hardly reacted."

The minimal reaction was not uncommon among adults and young people who said it was a sad, unfortunate accident but not nearly as devastating as events such as Sept. 11.

"It was an accident," said Pearson Castner, 16. "It wasn't anything malicious. It happens. There's nothing we can do about it."

Word reached Leonard, Texas, minister Dewey Watson as he and as many as 2,500 others were in the sanctuary of Jacksonville's First Baptist Church.

Watson is youth pastor for First Baptist Church in Leonard, which was in Columbia's return flight path and where people reported finding debris from the shuttle.

"It's truly a national tragedy," Watson said. "I still can't really believe that it has happened."

Everyone who was asked yesterday if this most recent disaster warrants ending the space program emphatically said no. "We've had two major disasters in all these years," said Brian Jenkins as he sat outside Thee Imperial in Five Points. "We're doing great. That's a great track record."

Staff writer Rich Tucker contributed to this report. Staff writer

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