NASA JOHNSON SPACE CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

KENT S. SLAYTON
INTERVIEWED BY JENNIFER ROSS-NAZZAL
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ROSS-NAZZAL: Today is November 11th, 2019. This interview with Kent Slayton is being conducted in San Antonio, Texas, for the JSC Oral History Project. The interviewer is Jennifer Ross-Nazzal, assisted by Sandra Johnson. Thanks again for taking some time for us this afternoon. We really appreciate it.

SLAYTON: You're quite welcome.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I wanted to start by asking you about your dad. He was, of course, a well-known astronaut and then became chief of Flight Operations at the Space Center. Did you understand as a child what your dad was doing and what his role was, what NASA was trying to accomplish at that point?

SLAYTON: Not early on. He was selected the day after my second birthday, so I grew up with this. All these guys—Al [Alan B.] Shepard was Uncle Al, and Uncle Gus [Virgil I. Grissom], and Uncle John [H. Glenn]—they were all just like family friends. We all just hung out together. As the programs expanded and press got bigger and bigger, they cordoned us all off. The families became a unit unto themselves. That's why mom got the astronaut wives' club. That was because it was so isolating. NASA pretty much said, "Do not talk to the press unless we're there." People in your front yard all the time. Mom realized it was really isolating and lonely

for the wives, so she wanted to create somewhere where people would just get together and be themselves and some camaraderie.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was curious about that, because I was looking at family photos, and I noticed that you were in one of the images at NASA. It was of the '62 parade. It was you, your mom, your dad in one of the cars.

SLAYTON: The ticker tape [parade].

ROSS-NAZZAL: I wondered if you had any memories of that barbecue [and parade].

SLAYTON: I do. The memories I have, and this is just dumb memories from a kid, but I remember sitting down on the floorboard and all this ticker tape coming down. I was grabbing [it], and I remember rolling it up into little rolls. That's what I remember, just sitting there. I don't remember the crowds, and I don't remember the noise. That's what I remember is just rolling those things up. Isn't that weird?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, that's funny. It's interesting what you can remember as a child, what makes an impression on you.

SLAYTON: Yes. Again, it was so early on. I know I was at the White House when I was young. Mom and dad told me I sat on JFK's [John F. Kennedy's] shoulders. He picked me up, put me on his shoulders. I have no memory of that.

After dad's flight I do remember going, I think [Gerald R.] Ford was president. I remember a luncheon with President Ford. I remember a walk in the rose garden, and there was presentations. The Oval Office, which I remember, was much smaller than I thought. He had a golden retriever at the time, and *Saturday Night Live* used to make fun of that. I don't know if you remember. We had a golden retriever, so that was fun. Just strange, the whole experience.

To answer your question, it was just what I always knew, so it didn't seem extraordinary to me. I don't think it was till dad actually flew. I was 18. I appreciated that because at that time I was old enough to get it. We'd been to all the other launches. I'd watched all the stuff happen. Dad had taken a back seat as far as himself being an astronaut. To see him all in the garb and training—I tried to learn Russian with him when he was learning Russian, but I was in high school and learning Spanish at the same time. Languages are not my thing, so that didn't work out. He learned Russian. I remember every day he was in there practicing Russian.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you ever go to work with your dad, ever go out to the Manned Spacecraft Center?

SLAYTON: Yes, just a little bit. We'd go out there. He'd have to get papers. We'd go out there and go up to the office. He'd get papers and make a few phone calls. It's funny what you remember. I was at the McDonald Observatory [Fort Davis, Texas], and I remember walking into that. I just stopped and looked at my wife. I said, "This smells like NASA." Isn't that weird?

ROSS-NAZZAL: What does NASA smell like? I have to ask.

SLAYTON: That's what she said, and I said, "It smells like this." I don't know whether it's the plastics. I don't know if it's the equipment, but they smelled the same. It has a distinct smell to it.

JOHNSON: That's interesting.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, that is interesting.

SLAYTON: Isn't that weird? I have no idea what that smell is. It's like an industrial smell, I guess. I don't know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: We'll have to bottle it. I bet you a lot of people would want to buy it.

SLAYTON: The smell of science I guess, of adventure.

ROSS-NAZZAL: A minute ago you were talking about Friendswood. Do you have any memories of moving down to Houston and moving into the Friendswood area?

SLAYTON: Yes. We lived in—there was some little cabanas there while the house was being built.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh yes, the yacht club.

SLAYTON: Yes. I'd completely forgotten the name. Thank you. We lived there while the house was being built, and then we moved in. Friendswood was just the best place anybody could grow up. It was a phenomenal little town; 600 people when we moved in, 6,000 when we left.

Halloween, they'd open the doors. We'd all run out and wander the neighborhood and come back in at the end of the day. There was never any questions about anything. It was a great town. I walked to school every day. We had one police officer. Then mom became a crossing guard, because we had to cross the main road and there was nobody to walk you across. Mom was the crossing guard forever, until she talked the police officer into hiring somebody to do it.

I loved Friendswood. It was an amazing place, a little Quaker town. You couldn't get cigarettes or alcohol. Mom was a smoker, so once I learned to drive it was always like, "Hey, mom, you need some cigarettes?" I got to drive out of town and go get her some. A great place to grow up, just amazing.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You lived in Imperial Estates, is that correct?

SLAYTON: Imperial Estates, yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were most of the people who lived in your neighborhood NASA employees or were they [employees of] other industries?

SLAYTON: I'd say maybe 50 percent. That's just a rough guess, but quite a bit. I know Mr. [Howard W.] Tindall, the Krafts, Norths, I'm just blanking on a bunch of their names.

ROSS-NAZZAL: We can always add them later if you want.

SLAYTON: We had some veterinarians and other people around us. A lot of engineers. A good family friend of ours, Lila [Jean] Livingston, she just passed away last year, been spending a lot of time with her. She told me that when they bought the house there it was a $25,000 house, and everybody in Friendswood was like, "Oh, those snooty people on Imperial Estates." I guess that was a lot of money back in the '60s for a house.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was wondering that. Were there any people from Friendswood who moved into Imperial Estates, or was it all new folks?

SLAYTON: Oh yes. A lot of the neighbors, just people that worked around town. It was probably fifty-fifty.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How do you think that Apollo impacted the Friendswood community? A lot of people that we've talked to in terms of Clear Lake talk about how they saw Apollo as something that everyone got behind. Everyone was in favor of it. It was like a big family. I'm just curious. Was that the same way in Friendswood?

SLAYTON: I didn't get that feeling, because again there weren't that many of us there. Everybody knew everybody.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It was so tiny.

SLAYTON: Mom would go and have her coffee every day. I remember that during dad's launch they had Marge Slayton Day. I remember that, and Cal Thomas—can't believe I remember his name—came down and did a big interview. It was a big deal for Friendswood, and all mom's coffee buddies were there. That was a big thing, that was uncommon, because for the most part mom and dad were just mom and dad. Nobody made a big deal out of it.

Mom was pretty involved in the community as a whole. Dad was working all the time. Mom was always involved in something or another. She was just one of those people.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That was something that we've been talking about. In that area, it seemed like the men were gone so often.

SLAYTON: A lot.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That it was the women who helped to create these communities. Granted, Friendswood was a community before you all arrived, and there were 600 people like you say. But they really had an impact on shaping the communities that we know today. Would you talk about your mom's role in shaping of Friendswood and things that she was involved in?

SLAYTON: Again, the astronaut stuff pretty minimal. She had the luncheon she would go to.

A little sidenote, mom was a real prankster. She would go to these luncheons, and she would come back. There was always a little plate of something. She was always bringing me something. I'd say, "Did you go to luncheon today?" She'd say yes, and there'd be some cookies or something. One day she had this little fudge. I asked her. I said, "What's this?" She goes, "Oh, it's just fudge left over from our luncheon today." I grabbed it and said, "This feels weird." She goes, "Oh, it's sponge fudge." I went, "Oh, cool," and popped it in my mouth. She had taken a sponge and cut it up and dipped it into bitter chocolate and made a whole plate of these.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Thanks, mom, I love you too.

SLAYTON: Yes. Then there was the April Fools' where my sandwich had a piece of cardboard in it instead of a piece of meat that said April Fools'. I opened up my Frito bag and all these gummy worms came spilling out. She was relentless. She was fun to grow up with.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I bet.

SLAYTON: I'm just trying to think. I was her only kid. If there was no guard crossing, she'd get fired up about that. Just whatever was going on. Halloween, she made all my costumes. Just very involved in life. Always had her girlfriends come over for tea. It wasn't until one day that I drank some of the tea I realized they weren't drinking tea. That was every afternoon. That was the '60s.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Right.

JOHNSON: Were they using teacups?

SLAYTON: No, remember those Tupperware glasses?

JOHNSON: Oh yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh yes.

SLAYTON: There was one of those sitting there, and it had some water in it. I said, "Hey, mom, can I have some water?" She said, "Sure." I slammed it back.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's a way to get you not to drink booze.

SLAYTON: It was pretty rude.

ROSS-NAZZAL: The girlfriends who came over, were they also astronaut wives or just local folks?

SLAYTON: Just local, all the people there in the neighborhood. Again, it was a great little neighborhood. We'd have cleanup days where the whole neighborhood would get together and

clean up the whole neighborhood. If somebody didn't have a lawn mower you'd mow their lawn, or if you had an edger you'd edge the lawn. Then you would sweep everything up.

Then they'd have a big barbecue down by the creek, which looped the whole neighborhood. It was that kind of a community. What's really interesting is they condemned the whole neighborhood because of the flooding. They've turned it into a park now. We flooded three times. I took my wife by there many many many years later. I said, "I've got to show you where I grew up." We pulled into the neighborhood, and it was just like when we left it, piles of Sheetrock. You're from Houston, you know what that looks like. They'd been hit again.

I remember going over to the house and visiting the people who were living there. The Red Cross came by, and they said, "Throw all the toys out." They said, "They're plastic." They said, "You need to throw everything out," because there was a Superfund site just up the creek and that contaminated everything.

I was talking to Lila Livingston, and she was running down the number of people who've died of cancer in that one little neighborhood. A huge number died of cancer. The kids my age, their kids have a lot of disabilities. A lot of them have learning disabilities, ADD [attention deficit disorder], Asperger's from the styrene tar that was being dumped in the creek upstream.

JOHNSON: That's been a big issue for a long time there.

SLAYTON: After mom died, I remember an attorney called me up. He was doing a class action suit against the mayor who owned the chemical plant. I never heard anything after that, which is probably just as good.

That was the community we lived in. Mom was always organizing something, or a part of it. This is just a real super sidenote here, but did you guys see *The Astronaut Wives Club* [TV show]? I was real frustrated about that. That woman was not mom in any regard. They just completely got her completely 180 wrong. I'm wanting to correct that somehow, and I don't quite know how to do that. We can maybe talk about that later.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think what might be useful is if we did an interview just focusing on your mom. We could come up with some questions to guide you through, to think about some things. If you want we can give you a list of topics and questions beforehand and talk about that. That was one of the other questions I was curious about, the book and what you thought about the book, which is the basis for the TV program. That might be a way.

SLAYTON: I was very very careful what I talked to Lily [Koppel] about. I know how the stuff goes. Once she sold the rights to the [TV show] they completely—I don't know. The actress who played mom was told there was no living relatives. She said, "I don't know how to play this woman, I don't know who she is. I've been told that she has no living relatives, so I just had to wing it." It was awful.

ROSS-NAZZAL: There's plenty of documentation if you actually go out and look.

SLAYTON: She turned mom into this real super snarky sarcastic person, and she was nothing like that. She was just as warm and as friendly as you could imagine. Never met a stranger [she didn't like].

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you belong to a church out in Friendswood?

SLAYTON: Not really. Easter, Christmas we'd go to the Methodist church, because that's what mom was raised-ish as. It was a Quaker community. I probably spent more time at the Quaker church. There were summer programs, summer Bible school. I spent a lot of time in summer Bible school. I loved the Quakers. They were wonderful.

Dad was not a very religious person. I know his dad was the caretaker. He was a farmer, but he was also the guy that plowed the roads in the wintertime. Also he would mow the lawn in the local Lutheran church and took care of the church and took care of the people, but he wasn't a member of the church. When he passed away they weren't going to let him be buried at the church and that did it for dad. That was the end of his [ties with religion].

No, I didn't really grow up in a religious household. Mom was definitely—she was a spiritual person. Dad was a nature guy; he was a hunter. He was out in nature all the time. A couple times I went hunting with him. I was a kid. I was like, "Shoot it, shoot it, shoot it." No, he just enjoyed just being out there. He did a fair amount of shooting, but he just liked nature.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I picked up a copy of your dad's book. Talked about going hunting with your dad. Were there other things that you would do? Or was he pretty busy with the space program through your childhood?

SLAYTON: Probably hunting and shooting, because again, he was gone a lot. I remember when he did come home if it was quail season he'd be hunting quail. If it was duck season be hunting

duck. I did some duck hunting with him, quail hunting. I wasn't real big on shooting the deer. But yes, that was most what we did. We had a canoe. We had a little creek in the backyard. We did a fair amount of canoeing up and down the creek. Those guys, they worked a lot.

Mom was pretty adamant about us eating as a family, which meant that we probably didn't eat before nine o'clock most nights. I remember I'd go over to a relative's house, and we'd eat at six o'clock at night. I just thought that was the coolest thing in the world. I can't remember when I had dinner in the daylight before. That was just something mom was insistent on.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's nice for the family to get together, have a meal, at least catch up on your days.

SLAYTON: Yes. I remember a lot of dinners on those little TV trays watching Carol Burnett.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I guess that was about that time, wasn't it?

SLAYTON: Yes.

JOHNSON: Same generation.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were there any traditions in your neighborhood? You mentioned Halloween and the cleanup. Were there other traditions that were tied to the space program, since there were a number of people in the program in your neighborhood?

SLAYTON: Not really. I think that was one of the reasons that they wanted to live in Friendswood. The one thing that I heard pretty consistently from mom and dad, because I always asked, "Why don't we live over there with everybody else?" They said, "This world is going to get very complicated and very busy, and we don't want to have a very complicated busy life. NASA is what your dad does." I'm paraphrasing here, "That's not what we're all about. We want to be a normal family living in a normal community. We don't want everything we do to be dictated by [the space program]."

Whenever there was a flight there was just press in your yard all the time. It was ridiculous. Because we lived over there, there wasn't so much of that. I think they really wanted to just [separate the two]. NASA stuff was NASA stuff.

In the summers, we had a lot of launches. Mom and I would go spend a lot of time in Florida. Every summer pretty much in Florida, hanging out at Henri Landwirth's hotel, the Holiday Inn there. We spent a lot of time on the beach. Mom would get super dark. I learned what black Irish means. I always knew we were black Irish, but I never knew what that meant.

The segregated South, I remember we stopped off at a restaurant and went into the colored side. I remember the whites and coloreds [sections]. I remember we went into the colored side, and they didn't say a word about it. This little window would open up, and this big old white jolly guy would look in and shut it; he'd open it and shut it. About the third time he goes, "Are you-all white?" Mom goes, "Excuse me?" He goes, "Are you-all white?" She goes, "Yes." Says, "Ma'am, you're in the colored section, you need to be over here with the white people." "I'm fine." He said, "No no no, you need to be eating here with the white folk." She goes, "I like the company I'm keeping."

At that point he said something. Then the cook over here said something. Then he said something and the next thing I know he and three white guys were coming in the front door and all these people were on their feet and chairs were flying. I just remember mom reaching in her purse and grabbed a wad of money and threw it on the table and grabbed me and ran out the door.

I remember that was in the days where your car was being serviced across the street. I just remember hearing screaming and breaking wood and all kinds of commotion.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Wow!

SLAYTON: Yes. That was pretty crazy.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That is nuts.

SLAYTON: That was tradition, I guess, hanging out in Florida in the summers. Again I think they didn't want us doing a lot of that, because there was a lot of dinners. It was very political at the time. They were just trying to keep normalcy as much as normal could be.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were most of your friends in Friendswood? Or would you hang out with Uncle Al and Uncle Walt's [Walter M. Schirra] kids?

SLAYTON: Most of the astronaut kids I don't really know, because I didn't go to school with them. Matter of fact, I think I was the only astronaut kid in my school. Yes.

Yes, we did [hang out]. Wally Schirra and Gus Grissom lived next door [to each other]. That's probably where we spent most of our time. Jo Schirra was mom's best friend, so we were a lot of time over there. What was the neighborhood called?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was it Timber Cove?

SLAYTON: Yes, thank you. We were a lot of time over there with them. That was home away from home, hanging out over there. Suzy was like my little sister. We fought all the time. That was probably as close as we got.

The Shepards at the time, I think they were living in Houston. They were living in a townhome, or like in a hotel, big building, a high-rise before they moved to River Oaks. Louise was real close with mom, spent a lot of time with them. Those were probably the two families I spent more time with, because that was mom's best friends.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I wanted to ask about the accidents. We had the fire in '67, and there were other astronauts who lost their lives in T-38 accidents. Did you and your mom provide assistance to families who were suffering through some of the trauma of that loss?

SLAYTON: Yes, mom did. Again, a lot of that stuff, the kids were insulated from it. [Theodore C. Freeman] was killed in a plane accident, and I remember mom spent a lot of time over there at her house, because yes, she was Air Force for the longest time. When you live on an Air Force base it was not uncommon, especially when you're married to a test pilot, a lot happens. People

dying was not uncommon. That was kind of part of the job, was providing moral support when somebody would lose their spouse, was providing all that support.

Neither of them talked a whole lot about that. I was a kid. Dad never talked about it. Never did he ever say a word about any of that. That was dad, he was a man of few words. I'd ask mom questions, and she'd just say, "Don't worry about it." There's a whole lot about that I don't know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was curious about that, especially with the Grissom family, being that your dad was pretty close with Gus.

SLAYTON: Yes, Gus was probably the closest dad ever had to a best friend. Yes, I know it was devastating. Supposedly dad had made some kind of recording. My stepmom called me up one day, and she said, "I found some recording, and I burned it." I said, "What was on it?" She says, "You'll never know." I have no idea what was on the recording, but it was him talking about all that.

JOHNSON: Gosh, wonder why she told you then.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I know, that's kind of horrible to say.

SLAYTON: That's a whole other story. I don't know. I know it was horrible on multiple multiple levels. That was his best friend. I know when dad died a lot of the people joked about how he and Gus would fly from coast to coast. They'd be in a plane together for hours. Nobody'd say a

word. Not a word. They didn't need to, but that was his best friend. Most people are [demonstrates chatting].

ROSS-NAZZAL: They're chatting.

SLAYTON: Yes, but that was those guys. That's what they did. They weren't talkative guys. Dad had an incident. I think this might have been before he was in NASA, I don't remember. He was climbing in a plane, and he stalled out and had an inverted spin. You're upside down going like this. [Demonstrates]

My understanding, from what he told me, is that means you're dead, because you can't get out of an inverted spin. He's kicking rudders, and he's trying all these different things. He noticed he got a wobble. He worked it and worked it, got the plane flipped around. Then those jets, and I don't know if you've ever seen, but the T-38s back then, they had to hook a vacuum up to the front of them. I used to take dad, I used to drive him to Ellington Air Force Base a lot and drop him off. I'd watch them fire up the planes, get the turbines going, and then watch them fly off.

He knew what he had to do was point the nose down and just scream at the Earth, and finally got enough speed going to fire the engines up. Now he's got the engines going full force, plus gravity going down to the ocean. He's now pulling up. I said, "How close did you get?" He said, "I was right almost at the tips of the waves and just leveling off."

He's telling me this story. I said, "Oh my God." I asked him a typical therapist question. I said, "How did you feel about that?" He just looked at me like I was speaking Chinese and goes, "What?" I said, "What was that like? You almost died, you're in this inverted spin, you're

supposed to be dead." He just looked at me. He couldn't process it. That's when I realized those guys don't feel. Feeling is a liability for them. If he had felt he never would have been able to have synched and intuited the machine and did what he did.

A lot of those guys, when I would ever read something, they'd go into space and they would speak poetically about what they were seeing, it's like "Oh, thank God." Because I'd ask dad, "What was it like?" He goes, "Oh, it was interesting." "No, I mean what's it like when you're looking down at the Earth?" I'd just get these real dry answers, because again, they weren't poets, they were technicians. They were working a job, and they had their schedules they had to keep.

That's the weird part about all this. A lot of people say, "What was it like?" It's like, "I don't really know." I never got the answer. I would ask mom, and she'd say, "Good luck, I've been trying to pull that information out too for years." It was just those guys. They just weren't chatty guys.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I have an interesting question then based off of that. Because I was curious about that before we came out. There were a number of families who suffered from trauma. Their dads were test pilots or astronauts. Do you think that influenced your career choice in any way?

SLAYTON: I don't know. I had the opportunity to learn to fly, and it just never hooked for me. I think that was a real disappointment for dad because he loved flying. He just loved it. I don't know. Dad had nerves of steel, I don't have nerves of steel. That's just not me. I probably got

more of mom's genes in that regard. I always joke with people, dad did outer space and I do inner space.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's a good quote.

SLAYTON: I've just always been a people person. That again I think is probably mom. Mom would go to a restaurant, and she'd say, "Oh, I ate at this really neat restaurant yesterday. You've got to go and try it out." I'd come into Houston. We'd go to the restaurant, and the waiter would come up. She goes, "So, Jim, how's little John doing?" "Oh, he's feeling a whole lot better." "Well, what did the doctor say?" "Well, it was just a this." "Okay."

I said, "I thought you were only here yesterday." She goes, "Yes." Everywhere we went she knew the waiters' names, she knew their stories. That was just her. I guess I absorbed that.

I had a psychology class in high school, and I loved it. It was just like my brain just [clicked]. But my school counselor said, "Well, that's a girl's job. Your dad is a scientist, and you need to be a scientist too." "Okay, yes." So I did three years of marine biology and that didn't go well. I finally flipped over. Mom just completely supported that. She said, "Do what you love doing." I said, "Well, that's—" I went from Fs to the dean's list, so I knew that's what I was supposed to be doing.

JOHNSON: Makes sense.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It does.

SLAYTON: I think that kind of job and that kind of career requires a certain personality set. Those guys were good at it, that's why they were picked. They were just in many ways bulletproof.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Some of the guys have talked to us about how they missed the '60s and everything that was going on with it, the civil rights movement, Vietnam, because they were so far buried into the space program. Do you think that was the case for you and your mom?

SLAYTON: No. I think we probably enjoyed the '60s more than dad did. Again, I think because we were kind of removed from all that. The '60s was crazy. When I think back on it, it was ridiculous, just the riots and Vietnam and the assassinations. It was really a crazy time. Then you'd have this beautiful music scene going on which I don't think we've even come close to before or since. Then there was this amazing NASA thing happening, which was just incredible.

It was just a real weird time because those were all very conservative guys. Then you'd have this hippie world. I'm always wanting black lights and incense for Christmas and Nehru shirts. Dad is just rolling his eyes and just praying to God I don't go south on him. I didn't. I was an Eagle Scout, so I was a good kid.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was your dad involved at all with Scouts? Or was that something that your mom did?

SLAYTON: As much as he could be. Again, he was gone a lot. That was mostly mom. That was mostly mom. Whenever dad was there, he was 100 percent in. When he was home, we were

doing something. Typically it was working in the yard. Or we'd go to the shooting range and shoot or go hunting. That was a lot of it.

Also too going over to a friend's house, because a lot of times dad was gone. Whenever Dad was home somebody would cook dinner, so we'd be hitting one of the neighbors' houses and having dinner over there. We did a lot of that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were you following what was going on with the space program? Or because your parents said, "We want you to have a separate life from NASA," were you interested in other things that were going on, and what were some of those things?

SLAYTON: When the NASA stuff was happening we were all in it, because it was a family thing. When there was something happening, because mom was so involved with the wives and of course dad, whenever there was something going on they were at somebody's house. Dad was off with the guys, and mom was with the wives. That's when I got to hang out with the other kids, usually during launches and stuff.

I remember watching movies over at—trying to remember. They're just fleeting memories. These again were kids I didn't spend a lot of time with. We'd go over and then have dinner. We'd all go upstairs and watch weird movies. It was again very isolated, very insular. Life would go on and we would do our thing. Mom was just very involved in Friendswood and the friends and the neighbors and just doing what moms do.

Then there'd be real intense weeks and months of NASA stuff going on and people coming and going and us coming and going, and then it'd be back to life again. That was just the norm for me. That was just the normal. Most of the people that know me, none of these people

in this office, nobody knows who dad is. Most people know me for years and decades, and they get mad at me when they find out who dad is. It's like, "Well, when does that come up in conversation?"

I just grew up in this world, and that's what the world was. Every now and then I reflect on it. It's like, "Yes, that was pretty amazing. That was pretty incredible stuff." It was just what was happening at the time. I don't know what it would have been like if I'd lived on the other side of the freeway. I don't know what it would have been like if I'd lived over there.

Probably would have been a lot more involved and certainly would have had a larger knowledge base, because that again would have been what everybody was doing 24-7. You're probably hearing that from a lot of people you talk to. Julie Shepard was trying to get a thing going here a while back. There was a couple of guys, entrepreneurs, that were trying to get a NASA center, an Apollo center, going. They had the land set aside and everything. A lot of the astronaut kids were getting together. We'd meet here in San Antonio, and they were telling stories.

It was just fascinating for me to just sit back and listen to these stories, because I'd never heard any of this stuff. Again, they were a little bit older than me. They were older when a lot of the stuff was happening. It's like I missed out on a lot, because they'd all be talking about all this stuff, "Oh, you remember that and remember that?" It's like, "Wow. I don't remember that because I wasn't there." But maybe that's okay too.

ROSS-NAZZAL: These were kids who lived in Nassau Bay or Timber Cove?

SLAYTON: Yes, exactly. They were all just blocks from each other. I remember that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Who were some of your friends in Friendswood? Were they local kids?

SLAYTON: Yes, they were just all my neighbors. my classmates and my neighbors. Again, probably a handful of them, their dads worked at NASA in one context or another, but again no astronaut kids.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you have any memories of Apollo 8 or Apollo 11? Were you at the launches for those?

SLAYTON: Oh yes, I was at all the launches. Mom and dad made a point [of taking me]. I was at all the launches. Apollo 11 was amazing. I mean they were all amazing. Every now and then I'll run into somebody that thinks it was all hoaxed. I say, "If you ever watched a Saturn V launch you would know it wasn't a hoax, because those things are like monsters. When they kick off you feel it. Even when they're still just a flame in the sky you can still feel it in your chest." If you can get that far, why not go the rest of the way? If you can pull that off.

Yes, the launches were absolutely amazing. It was just a lot of fun because we all stayed at Henri's place. Again we'd all gang together at the pool. That's where all the moms were. Was it Rene Carpenter? She had this witch laugh. If you ever watched *Carol Burnett Show*, everybody wanted her to do the Tarzan yell. That was her thing. We'd be swimming around. About 50,000 times a day we'd swim up to the edge of the pool, "Do the laugh, do the laugh!" She'd do this witch laugh. We'd all giggle and go swimming again.

Mom told me that when Alan's launch went off I was in tears, and I don't remember this. I think he was in a Redstone. I was in tears and probably needed a nap. She said why was I crying, and evidently I was sad because "Uncle Separd"—

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh.

JOHNSON: Oh.

SLAYTON: —had gone up in a Redstone and he knows I like green stones.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh.

SLAYTON: That's how young I was when all this stuff was going on. That was my understanding of the whole thing.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's hilarious. Why do you think it was so important for your folks to take you to all the launches but to maintain a separate life otherwise?

SLAYTON: Because it was historical, and again that was dad's job, and they were just cool. That was mom's job too. Mom took the wives on as her job. When dad went into more of an administrative job, she stepped up into the wife portion. When there was something important going on, if there was an injury or if there was a death, we were there. When there was a launch, we were there. When there was anything important going on, we were all there.

When there was nothing going on, then you do normal life, what normal people do. Just do the Halloween carnivals and go to school and go to Scouts. I remember I think it was fourth grade. There was something going on. It was the very first time we ever met with the Russians. I don't know quite what was going on, but I remember we were in Athens. I remember I was bored and riding up and down the elevator. I remember opening up into this room, and there's this table. There's all these men sitting there, and there was dad. There was these Russians, these guys had all their medals, all their stuff.

I remember just standing there and going, "Uh-oh," because I was supposed to stay in the room. The word was, "Don't leave the room." I got busted. I remember dad just looked over at me, and he smiled. He says, "Do you need anything?" I went, "No, I'm good." I went back to the room. I found out later on that that was our first meeting with the Russians, and that was back in—well, trying to think what that would have been, early '60s.

I don't know what they were talking about or what was going on. That was that weird tension thing. I don't know whether that was the beginnings of the detente or whether that was just how are we not going to nuke each other. I'm not sure what it was about. I didn't directly answer your question.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's the way oral history works. I did want to ask you, since you said that you were the only astronaut kid in Friendswood. Do you remember any buses coming around? I understand that there were some buses that would come to Timber Cove and Nassau Bay. Was anyone coming into your neighborhood looking for your house, your dad?

SLAYTON: No, never. I remember when we would go over to that part of town, whenever mom and the ladies would be doing their thing, the kids would be bored. It's like, "Can we go out and play?" The word was if somebody from the press comes up and talks to you you just say, "Thank you, sir," and you turn around and you run back home.

Because again there was just so much going on. We didn't know what we were talking about, and the press would probably pump us for all manner of weird stuff and then it would end up [in the newspaper]. Yes, we would just run around wild and then run on home, but we'd always keep an eye out for the press. That was my exposure. That was what was weird to me, was just seeing all these people in people's yards because we didn't have that.

When dad started with his launch and the Russians, we had a lot of Russians coming over to the house. I remember that was when our neighborhood became kind of a thing. We'd have 20 or so cars in the front yard and a lot of Russians in the house. We later on found out they didn't think these were our real homes. They thought that it was like those old Western towns, where you drive down the street and it's all fake fronts, and this was a fake house. They did not believe we really lived in those homes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: They thought NASA just staged it for appearances?

SLAYTON: Yes, because that's what they did.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Right.

SLAYTON: This is another kind of weird sidenote. Somehow mom had gotten her hands on this book called *The Great Russian Space Bluff*. It was about all the disasters of the Russian launches. I guess they had tried to send three men up in a two-man craft which meant no suits, and it didn't go well. The book was full of this stuff.

The Russians were coming over one day and mom said, "Ooh." She went and plucked that book off the shelf and hid it. I remember one of the guys, I think his name was Sergei, which we later found out was KGB, he came into the house. There's just this flurry of activity, cameras and people and shaking hands. I remember he went straight over to that bookshelf and looked at that one spot where that book was missing.

At the time I remember going, "That's weird." Mom had just plucked that thing off. I later on was asking one of our security guys years later. He said, "Oh, that's the way we're trained. We're trained to see what's not there." That spot on the table where there's dust everywhere but that one spot. We were later told. I remember telling everybody, "He's such a nice guy." Says, "He is a nice guy till they tell him to cut your throat. Then he's not a nice guy anymore."

JOHNSON: Yikes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Right, oh my gosh.

SLAYTON: That was all this weird stuff that was going on at the time. It'd be these weird moments of super intensity. I remember they'd come over and have dinner with us. We would

pray before the meal, and they would talk through the prayer, because they didn't know what we were doing. It was just real interesting.

Then when we went over to Russia right after dad's launch it was amazing. That's another whole conversation. That was just an absolutely amazing time, and they were so good to us. Rooms bugged all the time. Vance [D.] Brand's son, trying to remember what his name was. We used to work that. We used to have these political discussions. We'd talk about communism versus capitalism. The conversation would always lean towards, "This communism thing we should probably give more thought to. It's got a lot of pluses." Then we'd talk about how much we loved whatever town we were in, "But there's just no girls here. There's just no girls in Russia."

Sure enough, the next day we'd be walking along and next thing I know some weird-looking scary guy in a trench coat would have some little young girl, 16-year-old, in tow, and I'd get a personal tour. We played that one until they caught on and stopped. But, it was weird.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's funny. Did you tell your mom or your dad about these conversations?

SLAYTON: Oh yes. They told us beforehand. That's how we knew. Dad, evidently, during one of the trips they were bored. They were talking about pool, and next thing you know they had a pool table. I was not like any pool table they'd ever played pool on. The Russians I guess had tried to very quickly put something together.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's hilarious. I'm looking at your clock, and I do not want to take up any more of your time than we've been allocated.

SLAYTON: I probably didn't answer all your questions.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I knew that we wouldn't get through them all. Let's try and have a session and talk about your mom, if you're interested in doing something like that.

SLAYTON: Yes, I'd very much like to. Because again, not just because she was my mom, mom was an amazing person, and I was really excited with this [TV show]. It just was horrible, and if that's the way people think she was, that's how America remembers her, it's like no. I can't let that stand. I can't.

I talked to—I don't know who she was, but she was a journalist. I said, "I'd really like to at least have like an op-ed or some kind of a little rebuttal or an editorial," and I never heard back from her. I lost her card, so I didn't pursue it. I don't know if that's even anything that you guys do.

JOHNSON: It would be great to get the information.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It would be, because so many of the wives have passed away. We're never going to be able to interview them, so you're the closest thing that we have to her memory.

JOHNSON: Right, and your dad too. The stories, being in Russia and those kind of things. He can't tell them, but it's good to hear that.

SLAYTON: There's one other. I don't have time for that now, but there's one other story about when he almost died on Father's Day. He had a little Stinger airplane. He had this little Formula 1 plane. That's a much longer story.

All the people that were there are gone now. That was the one moment where I realized what kind of a pilot dad was, because I saw exactly what had happened. It was just amazing how quick he reacted, and he should have been dead. Basically the prop of the plane came off the plane. He was zinging around, testing this new prop out. He went around, and he didn't come back around. It's like, "Uh-oh." We're all running down the runway.

This is a small plane, you could probably fit it in this room, maybe a little bit bigger than that. He's dragging his plane by the tail and he's just mumbling and cussing under his breath, and just mad as a hornet. We're all just like, "Okay." As he's walking by I'm seeing the front of the plane go by, and the prop is hanging off the plane.

When we got back later on, my heart is just beating, and everybody was just like real quiet because he was real upset. We're just giving him lots of time. Then finally I said, "So dad, how well do these things glide? If this prop had come completely off." He said, "About as well as a pair of car keys." I said, "So how did you not crash?" He said, "I was coming around the turn, and I felt a slight little shudder. I just chopped the throttle." It was just instantaneous. He just knew something wasn't right, and he just chopped the throttle and took it right down to the runway in time for the prop just to come off. That's when I realized that these guys are like one with their machines. They can feel it. They can intuit it. They just knew exactly what to do at the right moment. That's when I thought so that's what makes these guys these guys is that they can do that. They just have that kind of feel.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Thank you.

SLAYTON: No, thank you.

[End of interview]