

Speaker at networking event out of this world

Astronaut scheduled to address students

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Students attending this year's Student Networking Event Friday at Showcase for Commerce are in for an experience that is certain to be out of this world.

The Challenge Program, which organizes the event for students participating in its program, has arranged for a former NASA astronaut, Navy Capt. Robert L. "Hoot" Gibson, to serve as the keynote speaker during the luncheon.

Gibson, who started his NASA career in 1978, has spent a total of 36½ days in space during the course of five missions flown. He left NASA in November to pursue private business interests.

"Lockheed Martin has provided the funding for the luncheon for the students since the inception of this event," said Barbara Grandinetti, executive director of The Challenge Program, which is based in downtown Johnstown.

"Last year, the people from Lockheed told us they wanted to do something else for the event, and they said if we called early enough that they would be able to provide us with an astronaut. So we put the wheels in motion as early as possible."

The luncheon is only one small part of the event for the roughly 250 students attending from schools throughout western and central Pennsylvania. As the name of the event infers, the students also will be presented with an excellent networking event.

Participants will be given the opportunity to tour Showcase for Commerce.

There, they will get insight into the types of business activities taking place in the region as well as have an opportunity to meet with members of the business community.

Grandinetti said the simple act of touring Showcase is enough to change the perceptions of those involved. She said in surveying students before and after the event, they leave Showcase with a much more favorable outlook on the future of the region's economy.

"We have talked for so long about

'brain drain' in this area, and this is an event that really combats that," said former Johnstown Mayor Don Zucco, president of The Challenge Program.

"This is a great opportunity for our young people to see the types of jobs being created in our area."

**DON ZUCCO,
FORMER JOHNSTOWN MAYOR**

"This is a great opportunity for our young people to see the types of jobs being created in our area. It gives them a chance to meet with business people and companies that they may not know about and shows them that there is opportunity for them after they graduate and when they come back."

The networking event is another exam-

ple of how The Challenge Program brings the business community together with education.

The organization partners with high schools to provide incentives for success as well as business ambassadors who sponsor schools and speak with students about their experiences.

The program was founded in 2003 by Dan Perkins, president and CEO of MTS Technologies and a native of Johnstown's Prospect neighborhood. He said the premise of offering students rewards of \$250 for excellence in community service, school attendance and most improved as well as highest grade point average is a simple concept, but what makes it so effective is that it involves the entire student body.

"When I first spoke with Barb and Don about this idea, they both agreed that it was kind of a basic concept. But the ramifications it has had is phenomenal," Perkins said. "The key is that we're not focusing on the top achievers or bottom rung kids like so many programs do, but we're including everyone, which allows for greater success."