



# REACH FOR THE STARS

Written by **Courtney Greenberg**  
Photography courtesy of Nancy Conrad

*Nancy Conrad is making sure young people have the chance to let their potential soar.*

**Nancy Conrad** is inviting the next generation to reach for the stars. The author and educator started a foundation to honor her late husband, celebrated astronaut Charles “Pete” Conrad Jr., to transform the way students learn.

“We’ve combined Pete’s legacy with my passion for education and the desire to give young people their moonshot,” Conrad says.

Fifteen years ago, she launched the Conrad Foundation to bring

competency-based learning to the forefront of education. The Conrad Challenge, the foundation’s primary program, is a platform for students to share ideas to make the world a better place. The Challenge combines Pete’s innate sense of curiosity with his skills in innovation and entrepreneurship. Students create commercially viable products and services to solve global and local challenges in the areas of aerospace and aviation, cyber-technology and security, energy and environment, and health and nutrition.

“Most people believe there are two ways to think: ‘in the box’ and ‘out of the box,’” says Conrad.

“We don’t have a box. We don’t say, ‘Make this, and if you make this better, you win.’ We just say, ‘Here are some of the challenges facing the planet, find a solution.’ As a result, students get in touch with their superpower skills: leadership, communication, collaboration, and cooperation.”

Conrad has been recognized for her work as an educator in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field, including being named one of 100 top leaders in STEM education and presenting at the Global Diversity Leadership Conference at Harvard University. She has also served on the Presidents’ Circle of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine for over 20 years.

After Pete died in 1999, Conrad co-authored his biography, *Rocketman: Astronaut Pete Conrad’s Incredible Ride to the Moon and Beyond*.

“After the publication of the biography, I retired for about two days and that was two days more than I had ever sat still,” she remarks.



Conrad with foundation staff

Because of her long history in education transformation, the idea for the foundation was formed in a conversation with a friend who mentioned that Conrad would be the ideal person to help students to “transition onto a purpose-driven education platform.” Since its inception, the foundation’s philosophy has been deeply rooted in Pete’s legacy and inspired by his (and many other students’) difficulties learning in the education system.

“My late husband was a young man who went to a very prestigious school, but he had

trouble reading and spelling,” Conrad explains. “Back in those days, they didn’t know what dyslexia was. He was flunking most of his classes and he hated school because he couldn’t understand what was going on.

What he did understand was flying. He would go to Paoli Airfield in Pennsylvania and do odd jobs to get the opportunity to fly as often as possible. Pete soloed at the age of 16.

“The best thing to happen to Pete was when his mother found another school for him to attend,” she continues. “The headmaster at that school saw something special in Pete, took him under his wing, and he began to thrive. Pete attended Princeton University with a university and America’s Navy scholarship. He was an NROTC scholar and upon graduation, he became a test pilot. When President Kennedy asked for a few good men to go to the Moon, it was the perfect adventure for Pete.”

Pete flew four flights in space and nailed a pinpoint landing on the Moon on *Apollo 12*. He was the third man to walk on the Moon. He then went on to fly *Skylab*, the first U.S. space station. *Skylab* was damaged at launch and for the repair, Pete was awarded a Congressional Space Medal of Honor.

“Pete got his moonshot because an educator took him under his wing,” says Conrad. “That’s what we do at the Conrad Foundation, we take students under our wing. By inviting them to design a sustainable future, we give them their moonshot.”

Through Pete’s success in a purpose-driven environment, it was clear to Conrad that a new way of learning was crucial for forward-thinking, innovative students.

The proof that competency-based learning is effective can be



Conrad with students, educators, sponsors, and guests of the 2019 Conrad Challenge Innovation Summit, held at NASA's Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex





John F. Kennedy Space Center director  
Robert D. Cabana and Conrad

seen in the work of students who participate in the Conrad Challenge. Over the years, it has attracted a global community of thousands of students, aged 13 to 18, with entrepreneurial spirits, who are focused on creating a sustainable future.

“These students see the world in the same way the Moonwalkers did. When they looked back, these astronauts saw a fragile blue-and-white marble, suspended in a black velvet sky, without borders or boundaries. Gen Z, the digital natives whom we work with, seem to see the world in the same way,” Conrad explains. “They work together across cities, states, countries, and socioeconomic and gender differences.”

The Challenge’s final round, the Innovation Summit, is historically held at the Kennedy Space Center. This year, due to the pandemic, the foundation hosted a Virtual Innovation Summit, which was an easy transition for “our digital natives” (as Conrad calls them). Student teams were highlighted from around the world with solutions such as a system to prevent opioid overdoses with an app and a bed for as-

tronauts that would let them retain muscle mass and normal blood flow and prevent vision deterioration.

Conrad is hopeful for the future because of the bright young minds she connects with through the Conrad Foundation.

“COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the challenges young people are facing,” she notes. “I am so encouraged by what these student teams can do. They’re so brilliant. Once you give them that chance to participate in their education, they find their cool abilities and they bloom, just like Pete did.”

As for her own legacy, Conrad is doing exactly what she is meant to do: using this opportunity to improve the education system.

“We always say we need to leave a better world for our children. But we also need to leave better children for our world,” she concludes. **LM**