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# FROM MATH TEACHER TO THE WHITE HOUSE

BY JEFF GILBERT '87



Cindy Hasselbring '95 wanted to be an astronaut. She applied five times to NASA and was turned down every time.

"I tell kids failure is an option," she said, "because sometimes our failures lead us to better places."

Like a career path from high school math teacher to a job at the White House. Hasselbring worked for the National Science Foundation and was assigned to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. She served as Senior Policy Advisor and Assistant Director, helping develop policy for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education. She worked with federal agencies like NASA, the National Science Foundation, the Department of Defense, the Department of Education, and many others.

"It's amazing how we have detours in our life that cause us to go in different directions than we would've planned but are far better," Hasselbring said.

## REDUCED GRAVITY

Walking past the West Wing on the way to her office was never a part of the career equation for a math teacher from Milan, Michigan. But it's a path she says God put her on when she first applied to be an astronaut in 2003.

Out of thousands of applicants, Hasselbring attended NASA workshops for teachers that included two reduced-gravity flights. More than 30 times, she experienced 30-second bursts of varying degrees of reduced gravity. She conducted experiments with science and math teachers and ran some of her own. She laughs at the memory of squirting water out of a bottle and seeing it float in the shape of a sphere, then seeing it splash down when gravity returned.

"There's nothing like it on earth," she said. "It was as close to space as I may ever get."

Hasselbring has also attended three space shuttle launches. On one of those trips, she sat poolside next to a teacher and was encouraged toward another giant leap . . . in

her career. Hasselbring had already been turned down once for the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship Program. She took the advice, applied again, and in 2011 left Milan for Washington, D.C.

The fellowship in Washington was for one year at the National Science Foundation. Then she would return to Milan to teach and help coach cross-country and track as she had for 16 years. But after helping shape policy for the benefit of math and science teachers, she was asked to stay another year. She would have to resign her teaching job and make a permanent and difficult move away from her hometown and family.

As she considered her options, she sought the advice of two godly couples: her pastor and his wife, Doug and Lisa Strader, and former astronaut, Col. Jack Lousma, and his wife, Gracia, who she had befriended after they visited her church in Michigan several years ago. They both encouraged her to consider this an opportunity the Lord had provided.

"He opens the door so much but not fully," Hasselbring said. "So we can't see everything that's going to happen in the future, causing us to really have to trust."

## WHITE HOUSE LAUNCH

Hasselbring says her unexpected and unplanned — on her part — launch to the White House was marked by many people God used to guide her. In her second year as an Einstein fellow, she worked for Dr. Joan Ferrini-Mundy, a leading mathematics education researcher and president at the University of Maine, on a committee of federal agencies providing STEM education programs. Learning how STEM policy operates in the federal government prepared Hasselbring for the next steps.

"She really took me under her wing and had confidence in me," Hasselbring said. "I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself at the time as far as my role in the federal government."

Hasselbring stayed in Maryland and worked as a

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*Cindy Hasselbring '95*



special assistant on STEM education to the Maryland state superintendent of schools. In the meantime, her interest in space led her to become a pilot. In 2016, she began an almost four-year run with the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association in Frederick, Maryland, as their Senior Director of the High School Aviation Initiative, which offered a four-year aviation STEM curriculum to high schools at no charge.

Hasselbring wasn't looking for another job, but the Executive Director of the National Science and Technology Council came looking for her. After two interviews, she had the job that took her to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

"I was really excited to see how God could use me here in the federal government as a light for Him," Hasselbring said.

## STEM EDUCATION CHAMPION

Among the many projects Hasselbring led was the development of a plan to help veterans and their spouses overcome barriers to accessing STEM education and careers. She is also a champion for exposing young girls to the career possibilities in STEM fields. She took girls on field trips when she was a teacher, and she has led an aviation camp for girls

at the Experimental Aircraft Association airshow in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, for the past 10 years.

"The job growth in STEM is growing at a quick rate," Hasselbring said. "These are high-paying jobs that can help support families, but kids have to be prepared for them, have an awareness about them, and see themselves in them."

**I was really excited to see how God could use me here in the federal government as a light for Him.**

*Cindy Hasselbring '95*

Although Hasselbring was not a political appointee, her service at the White House ended in February. She will work at the National Science Foundation until August and is confident that the same Father who launched this part of her career will guide her to a safe landing.

"I am trusting the Lord to lead my next steps," she said. "He is faithful."

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