



# APOLLO 11

## TRANQUILITY BASE : 20 JULY 1969

### 40 YEARS A MEMORY

#### Murrysville Artist Displays Love of 1969 Moon Launch

The whole world was watching on July 20, 1969, the day on which men from Earth first set foot on the Moon, nearly a quarter of a million miles away. Television viewers world over cheered when Neil Armstrong uttered the words, "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind," on that warm summer day.

Murrysville attorney and artist Bob Bickers vividly remembers watching the events unfold with his family back in Memphis, Tennessee. Bickers, a self-confessed space geek, recently shared those memories along with his Apollo program-themed artwork in an exhibit at the Gallery Space in the Monroeville Public Library. In addition to the photos and artwork on display, Bickers also showed off his collection of historic newspapers and magazines featuring front page and cover articles about the achievement.

The artist was just 13 when Armstrong and Aldrin set up Tranquility Base, but he'd been following the space program from the beginning. He even wanted to be an astronaut, but, somewhere along the way, ended up in law school. He never lost his fascination with space exploration though. Instead he channeled that curiosity into his studies and his art. He read every book on space in the Memphis library and began collecting space memorabilia, building model spacecraft, and drawing space-related images. In fact, he sold his first artwork to schoolmates for a nickel. In seventh grade, he took first place in his school's science fair with his detailed plan and blueprints for a manned mission to Mars using the Saturn V rocket's third stage. He now says that NASA used the same idea to make the ill-fated Sky Lab space station.

Like legendary anchorman and fellow space enthusiast Walter Cronkite, Bickers both informed and entertained his audience of about 30 people with his recollections of the space race. He even shared a few stories told by celebrities, including no less a space authority than Captain James T. Kirk of Star Trek fame. Actor William Shatner wrote in his memoirs that he watched the moon landing on a small black and white TV, alone, in a trailer while contemplating the premature ending of the five-year mission of the USS Enterprise by the powers-that-be at Star Fleet Command, also known as the NBC.

Bickers set the stage for the moon landing by recapping the entire Apollo Program starting with the tragic fire that took the lives of Apollo I astronauts Gus Grisson, Ed White and Roger Chaffee during a January 1967 training exercise, and ending with the détente-era Apollo-Soyuz test mission in July 1975. He even mentioned the Soviet Union's ill-fated manned moon mission that apparently ended after an on-pad explosion. The Soviet space program, like its American counterpart, continued and grew stronger in the face of these failures, eventually resulting in the Mir space station, which remained an active working station for 15 years before it was abandoned and deorbited.

As for his artwork, Bickers explained that he used some computer wizardry to enhance or embellish the photos, most of which are in the public domain, including several that he colorized ala Andy Warhol. The one photo that is completely original is that of the Bickers family watching the moon landing; the artist is the young man holding the family dog, Tiger. Bickers said he added the image of Armstrong and the LEM to the television screen it did not show up in the original picture taken by his father. This photo was prominently displayed on the MSNBC website as part of the network's tribute to the events of 40 years ago. Turning to his drawings, Bickers pointed out that he chose not to add stars to his paintings because he wanted to show the harshness of the space environment and to convey the difficulties NASA faced trying to fulfill President Kennedy's pledge to land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth. The painting, "The First Step," is a good example of that harsh reality; the suited Armstrong appears to be the only living soul in a cold, vast universe.

To learn more about the artist and to view some of his work, visit his website at <http://www.bobbickers.net>.

