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Glenn, of course, was up there before. On Feb. 20, 1992, aboard the Friendship 7 mission, he became the first American in orbit. He subsequently turned to politics, and eventually became a longtime U.S. senator from Ohio. Although Glenn is taking to the skies to help forward scientific research on the impact of aging on human beings, the subject of his space sequel is one that has prompted debate all over America whether it was done as a publicity stunt, to spark interest in the space program.

It was a debate that also reached Koperski's classroom and those of Forest teachers Connie Qualman, Cathy Smith and Pat Wagner during the weeks leading up to the launch.

"We've talked about the scientific purpose of him going up," Koperski said. "And the whole scientific purpose of the space program in general. The kids, the majority of them think he should go up because of who he is and his background and the

fact he's an American hero."

Some students said Glenn should have relinquished the opportunity, a view Koperski doesn't share.

"Some kids were saying, 'He's cutting in front of younger astronauts who are more capable... and should have the chance to go.' But one girl said, 'No, they've all been cutting in front of him for 36 years and he's just getting back in line.' How insightful."

Ari, a student in Qualman's class, said Glenn's nine-day space stint "might help people (of) any age to see how it affects their bodies and it might make people feel better, no matter what age they are."

Koperski said Glenn's participation on the shuttle is legitimate. But she does think, however, that it will help people re-discover NASA's space program.

"This is the most-publicized launch since the ill-fated Challenger (in 1986)," Koperski said. "I hope it's something they'll remember for a long time. This would not be on every major

channel if he weren't going."

Space exploration might need new life from a national perspective. But at Forest, interest in the subject has hardly waned, Koperski said.

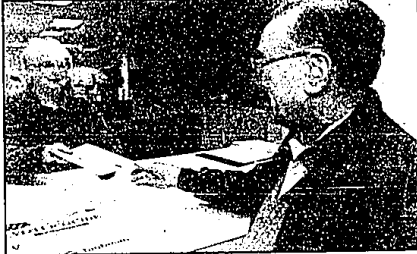
"It's the one topic that's motivated them more than anything," she said. Students have logged onto the Internet, to peruse NASA Web sites. They've written John Glenn biographies and gleaned newspapers and magazines about the subject. And, as displayed on a bulletin board near the media center TV, they created their very own "mission patches."

Koperski pointed to one favorite patch, a collaboration between fifth-graders Lai Ho and Andrea Marcos. Its foreground included an astronaut, attached to the orbiter; in the background was a rainbow emerging from the Earth.

She said students were already into learning about space exploration, long before Glenn was picked to go up aboard Discovery.

"It's exciting, adventurous," Koperski said. "Plus, I talk non-stop about it. I'm hoping now that, since they've had exposure, they'll fall in love with it."

Ari certainly plans on doing that. "I like space, the astronauts and stuff."



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL DRAGLER
All done: Lester London hands an absentee ballot to Farmington deputy clerk Janice Schmidt.

Absentee from page A1

bers are up sharply in Farmington. City Clerk Patsy Cantrell said just 800 requests were made in the last gubernatorial election.

There were 9,700 requests by Farmington Hills residents for that 1994 election, but there were local issues on the ballot.

London said voting absentee "simplifies life," but it is something he didn't dream of doing when he was a younger man.

"When I was young, I didn't have an excuse to vote absentee. It's one of the benefits of aging."

Besides, there's really nothing to it. At least not for him.

"I'm at the (Farmington Public) library quite often," London explained. "So all I have to do is go to city hall and pick it up and drop it off a day or two later."

Another longtime absentee ballot voter is Nancy Leonard of Farmington. She claims that she originally started picking up the ballots for her husband, Arthur, and then decided she might as well also vote absentee.

Although she misses out on getting out on election day and talking with other voters at Farmington's Precinct 1, Leonard - an eighth-year absentee voter - likes having the opportunity to study the candidates and issues and not having to make rushed decisions.

Leonard tends to take ballots out early. But she waits until almost the deadline to return them, just to read up on any

late-breaking developments that could affect her vote.

"I like talking to people and seeing how they vote," Leonard said. "But (voting by absentee ballot) does give me the chance to peruse the ballot."

Leonard said it is key to not turn in the ballots too soon.

"You might miss a piece of the puzzle... It's hard enough to vote without getting the low-down on everybody. If they're local (candidates or issues) you know. But, for the college trustees, for example, those are a complete blank."

Farmington residents Carol and Rudy Wantin, in their early 80s, have been voting absentee for 15 years. Like Leonard, the convenience is important. Like Leonard, so is getting up to speed on what's being decided.

"We have them sent to us and then we take them back to the city," said Carol Wantin, who formerly worked as a Farmington city election worker. "We get them at least two or three weeks before (the election) so we have more time to study them."

Wantin said many people who go out to the polls also make it a point to become informed before voting, however.

"It depends on what you're voting on," she said. "If it's something you're interested in, and you go to the polls, you'll study."

Residents in both Farmington and Farmington Hills must have picked up their absentee ballots as of Saturday. They are encouraged to return them to the respective city halls by the end of the business day on Monday, Nov. 2.

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