Why did you become an astronaut?

Michael Gernhardt/NASA Astronaut: So, I started out with the love of the ocean. And about early high school, or even late junior high school, we were doing Skylab and then the underwater living experiment, Tektite. And I loved the ocean, but I was starting to get interested in physics, so I set a distant goal to do the most I could with the life I had both mentally and physically. And that, to me, was being an astronaut. So, I pursued my interest in the ocean and, you know, engineering, subsea engineering, physiology and so forth. But, set that distant goal of being an astronaut and the dream came true. So, it's been great.

How did underwater training prepare you for your spacewalking duties?

Michael Gernhardt/NASA Astronaut: So, they're different and they're similar. They're similar in the sense that you're doing a job in a hostile environment. And you really have to think about it, you have to know exactly what you're going to do and have Plan A and Plan B and Plan C and have that all worked out before you get into the operation. Underwater, your world is closer in. I mean, you're looking, you know, two or three feet in front of you. Sometimes there's no visibility at all. So, you're doing everything by feel, and
with, you know, sort of imagining things with your brain. When you're out in space, you've got unlimited
visibility. You can see, you know, millions of miles. And so, visibility's not a problem. And even at night, we
have helmet lights. The biggest difference is that you're in a pressurized spacesuit. And the suit is
pressurized to about the same pressure as a football or a basketball, at 4.3 pounds per square inch. So,
every time you move, you're working against that inflation pressure. Every time you close your hands in a
glove, you're working against that. And that, that is a big factor. The other thing that's very different is, you
know, we train underwater. Underwater you have the viscosity and the drag of the water. When you get
out in space, there's basically no gravity or microgravity and there is no drag. And so, between you and the
suit, you weigh about 500 pounds. And even though you have no weight, you have that mass, and so, you
have to move slow. My motto is always, you cannot go too slow. And never let your hands get going faster
than your brain. So, the EVA task, you're actually thinking a lot. You're thinking about what
you're doing, you're thinking what's next, you're thinking where your buddy is, where the
airlock is. So, you're mind is in high gear, but you want your body to move slow and
methodically and be very careful with respect to all the actions that you do.
How would you describe the sensation of your first spacewalk?

Michael Gernhardt/NASA Astronaut: So, you know, when you first get out the door, you know, you're focused on your spacewalk and on the objectives and so forth. And you're thinking ahead to all the tasks. And it's not very often that you get to pause and reflect that hey, I am really out in space, I'm really above the Earth. And probably the time that it hit me the most was my first spacewalk on STS-69. For 20 minutes one of my tasks was to go up high on the end of the robot arm in the middle of the night. They turned all the lights out. And we had these new glove heaters because we'd had people get cold hands. And so, my only job for 20 minutes was to sit up there to see if I would get cold. And, you know, that's a big departure from most spacewalk activities where you're really working your tail off. So, I was up there in the middle of the night, all the lights out, which doesn't happen very often, if ever, and I remember I can see Jupiter and its four moons with my naked eye. And then, I was looking down and I could see a fine line of white light on the wing of the shuttle. And then a few seconds later, a crescent of blue as the Earth was rising. And then, for about 15 or
20 seconds, you're hanging there in the middle of the terminator -- in between day and night -- just floating in space. And we came out on the other side, over St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, right on top of Hurricane Marilyn. And, I had actually been a diving instructor down there. And I remember looking down and seeing that hurricane and I was overcome by a great sense of pride. Not for myself, but for humankind. That we can have the technology to put me up there, you know, this great team as NASA. And here I was above the hurricane looking down from the heavens.

What were some special moments that you experienced while spacewalking?

Michael Gernhardt/NASA Astronaut: So, most of the time on a spacewalk, I personally am so focused on my task that I, that that's my priority without a doubt. I don't even bother like taking cameras out to take pictures until everything's all done. Having said that, there are moments within a spacewalk where you really don't have that much to do, i.e., we're waiting on the station RMS to position the airlock. And so, we're holding in place just hanging on handholds or riding the arm back and forth from the shuttle to the space station. And during those moments, you know, you go for it. And you look at the stars and the Earth.
And, you know, you just ponder where you are, how you got there and the great teamwork it takes to get there. And those are real special moments that I remember very distinctly.