

Jeff Bezos: A rocket launched from Miami's Palmetto High

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Trish Robb / Miami Herald file

In this 1982 Miami Herald Neighbors' story, Palmetto High graduates Ursula Werner and Jeff Bezos, behind camera, taught 10-year-olds lessons out of Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels." They called their project The Dream Institute.

When Jeffrey Preston Bezos graduated from Miami Palmetto Senior High in 1982, he had big plans to change the world.

The valedictorian, National Merit Scholar and Silver Knight award winner for science told the Miami Herald he wanted to "build space hotels, amusement parks, yachts and colonies for two or three million people orbiting around the earth."

Eventually, his grand plan included getting everybody off the blue planet and turning it into a big park of sorts.

"Even when he was in high school, all the teachers who taught him knew Jeff was something special and that he would be going places," said Palmetto science teacher Cullen Bullock, a 33-year veteran at the school.

Bezos certainly did change the world, founding Amazon.com, the largest retailer on the World Wide Web, and creating a model for Internet sales.

And on Monday, he made jaws drop again with reports that he had purchased The Washington Post for \$250 million. Bezos, one of the world's wealthiest men with a net worth of more than \$22 billion, said he intends to apply his savvy as an e-merchant to one of the premier newspapers in the world, which has been struggling financially.

Even back in his high school days, Bezos talked about amassing a fortune, recalls former girlfriend Ursula Werner.

"Jeff always wanted to make a lot of money," she said. "It wasn't about money itself. It was about what he was going to do with the money, about changing the future."

The couple were featured in a Miami Herald Neighbors story just weeks after their graduation from Palmetto in June 1982. They talked about a special project they had launched — an early sign of Bezos' imaginative mind.

Bezos and Werner conducted a 10-day course for 10-year-old students to teach them about Jonathan Swift's book Gulliver's Travels, about black holes in space, nuclear war and how electric

currents work. The Ivy League-bound students — Bezos was headed for Princeton — called it “The Dream Institute.”

At Palmetto High, teachers and fellow students knew Bezos as one of the smartest students in a school full of smart kids with an obsession about space colonies.

Rudolf Werner, Ursula’s father, remembers Bezos’ big talk about space life.

“He said the future of mankind is not on this planet, because we might be struck by something, and we better have a spaceship out there,” Werner told Wired magazine.

To this day, Bezos retains his interest, as well as a business interest, in the space industry. In 2000, he founded a space flight company called Blue Origin and has been active in recovering rockets used during moon exploration missions.

Joshua Weinstein, Bezos’ best friend at Palmetto, told the magazine there was nothing “spacey” about his friend.

“Jeff was always a formidable presence,” Weinstein said.

When Bezos made clear his intention to become class valedictorian, Weinstein said everyone knew they were now working for second place. Bezos graduated first in a class of 689.

Born in Albuquerque, N.M., Bezos had ended up in Miami-Dade, thanks to his adopted father, a Cuban exile.

Mike Bezos, who came to the United States alone as a teenager in 1962 as part of the famed Operation Pedro Pan, had settled in Albuquerque to attend college, and met and married Bezos’ mother, Jackie. Mike Bezos eventually adopted the 4-year-old Jeff, giving him his last name.

“I’ve never met him,” Jeff Bezos said of his biological father in a 2011 interview with Wired. “But the reality, as far as I’m concerned, is that my Dad is my natural father. The only time I ever think about it, genuinely, is when a doctor asks me to fill out a form.”

Mike Bezos joined Exxon as a petroleum engineer and the family moved several times during Jeff’s childhood, from Albuquerque to Houston, then briefly to Pensacola, and then to Miami.

Today, Jeff Bezos’ name is on a plaque outside Palmetto’s school auditorium, honoring notable graduates.

“Most of the students know Amazon’s founder graduated from the school and are very proud of it,” Bullock said.