

# OPINIONS

## INSPIRATIONAL LIFE

### Space age: Wally Funk (finally) made it!

I tried to resist the billionaires' space race.

The space trips by Virgin Galactic's Richard Branson and Blue Origin's Jeff Bezos were exciting, but how rich people spend



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their money is only of passing interest to me.

I'm astonished that anyone would bid \$28 million for a 10-minute ride, even to outer space, as an unnamed individual did in Blue Origin's auction. Even more astonishing, the winner canceled, citing scheduling conflicts. Really?

In that person's place July 20 was the 18-year-old son of a real estate mogul in the Netherlands. The dad paid a lower, undisclosed sum for Oliver Daemen to become the world's youngest space traveler. Teens I know are thrilled to get an old Honda. Really.

But then along came Wally.

Bezos, the world's richest human, invited Mary Wallace "Wally" Funk, an 82-year-old aviator who

trained to become an astronaut in the 1960s, as his "honored guest" on his historic space flight. Funk was the oldest person ever in space when she went up with Bezos, his brother Mark and Daemen in the New Shepard rocket, named for astronaut Alan Shepard.

How it is that most of us had never heard of Wally Funk but know way too much about Britney Spears is a conundrum of our modern age. Funk is exemplary, a model of patience, hard work, perseverance and grit.

So, before we sink back into the morass of COVID-19 statistics and dysfunction on Capitol Hill, let us savor the remarkable, inspirational life of Wally.

Funk made her first attempt at flight about age 5, donning a Superman cape and "flying" off her daddy's barn onto a bale of hay. She later made balsam wood airplanes and hung them in her bedroom, she said in an oral history interview.

In learning about Funk, I discovered she and I have something in common.

We both attended Stephens College in Columbia, Mo. Stephens started



BLUE ORIGIN VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In this undated image, Mercury 13 astronaut trainee Wally Funk met with Jeff Bezos.

an aviation program for women students in the 1940s. The Flying Susies was the first of its kind in the country. The college ended the program in the early 1960s, before I arrived.

Funk went to Stephens in 1956, earning her pilot's license at age 17. At that time, Stephens was a two-year "girls school," and Funk transferred in 1958 to Oklahoma State University, which had a robust aviation program.

In 1961, three years before Bezos was born, Funk volunteered for the Mer-

cury 13 program, a privately funded program aimed at testing whether women could be astronauts. At 21, she was the youngest of the 13 women selected. They called themselves the FLATs — First Lady Astronaut Trainees.

Through dozens of punishing physical and psychological tests, the FLATs were found to be just as qualified, if not more so, than the men training for Project Mercury. Funk endured 10 hours and 35 minutes inside a sensory deprivation tank — longer

than anyone else. But the women were not allowed into space.

Then-Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson wrote, "Let's stop this now!" on a letter about women astronauts, and in 1962, the FLATs received telegrams saying their training had been canceled.

Funk applied to NASA four times to become an astronaut and was rejected each time. At one point, she was told she didn't qualify because she lacked an engineering degree and would need to have one in nine months, which was

impossible.

She racked up other firsts: first woman Federal Aviation Administration inspector and the first woman air safety investigator of the National Transportation Safety Board. She kept flying, logging more than 19,600 flying hours. She has taught more than 3,000 people to fly.

And she kept her dream alive. In 2012, Funk used her savings to buy a \$200,000 ticket for one of Branson's future spaceflights. Then Bezos asked her to come along for free. A little one-upmanship there?

After the 10-minute flight, Funk emerged from the capsule grinning, her arms spread wide, as though embracing the world.

"I loved every minute of it. I just wish it had been longer," she said. They had four minutes of weightlessness.

"I want to thank you, sweetheart," Funk said to Bezos. "I've been waiting a long time."

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## CNBC'S TOP STATE FOR BUSINESS

### Congratulations, Virginia. Now let's earn it.

This past week, CNBC named Virginia "Top State for Business."

That's likely old news by now as incumbent politicians wasted no time flaunting it as a reason to stay the course. And why not? It's a headline that most would be proud of. That is, until you read the fine print.



Michael B. Watson

As a former legislator who focused on business and workforce issues, I take no pleasure in criticizing Virginia's business climate. As a 30-plus-year entrepreneur, however, with companies in both Virginia and North Carolina, I must. If we don't

admit we have a problem, we'll never overcome it.

So what makes a good business climate anyway? Factors vary by type of business of course, but some components are critical to any business. Among them are minimal barriers to entrepreneurship, a healthy transportation and communication infrastructure, low cost to do business, high-quality and affordable education, a vibrant and available workforce, low cost of living and a practical regulatory environment that works with, not in opposition to, business success.

By CNBC's own findings, Virginia ranks poorly in most of these. Under Cost of Doing Business we rank 26th, falling below the nation's 50th percentile, while Cost of Living for employees is even worse at No. 32. Without our excellent ports, Virginia's Infrastructure would have scored well below its still-low ranking of 24th.

As noted, we are blessed with a quality university and community college system, which contributes to Virginia's third place Workforce ranking. However, cost to attend college here is among the highest in the nation, ranking an abysmal 45th by U.S. News & World Report.

Regarding Barriers to Entrepreneurship, WalletHub ranks Virginia an unacceptable 34th on its list of the Best & Worst States to Start a Business. In fact, Virginia failed to rank first in any single category graded by CNBC.

So how did we win their top spot, you might ask? Simply put, by changing the rules. Prior to this year's contest, Quality of Life was the fourth most heavily weighted category, judging factors like crime rate, quality of health care and the environment, among others.

This year, this category was "reimagined" into "Life, Health and Inclusion" with an increased value, matching Infrastructure as the second-most weighted factor in CNBC's algorithm. This new category earned Virginia points for di-

versity, equity and inclusion, each important in today's environment.

Yet the legislation touted as promoting these issues was so poorly written, it puts employers on the defensive on nearly every hiring and firing action, likely hurting the very individuals it purports to protect.

Virginia's decision to repeal voter ID laws buoyed its 11th place ranking in this category, while taking points away from states like North Carolina, Georgia and Texas. Stand where you will on voter ID but rest assured, this issue has little to do with the success of a business.

Besides, state and federal laws prohibit employers from hiring anyone who is unable to present a picture ID, meaning all of our employees have them.

Notwithstanding CNBC's selection, there indeed is much work to be done to make Virginia more attractive to employers. As I compare Virginia to North Carolina on a daily basis, here are a few areas where we could start.

Corporations in Virginia pay a 6% income tax rate compared to 2.5% in North Carolina. A business, professional and occupational license (BPOL) in Virginia costs a small company like mine thousands of dollars each year regardless of profitability; there is no such fee in North Carolina.

Virginia's arcane method for calculating machinery and tools taxes is a deterrent for manufacturers to move or expand here, while this property mostly is exempt from taxation for North Carolina manufacturers.

Despite the high-quality ranking of our universities, intellectual property disputes and other policies of state greed steer industry research partnerships to North Carolina and other states that benefit from the money, the patents and the jobs they create.

This is a leading success factor behind North Carolina's booming life science industry, along with its skilled workforce drawing from more than 600,000 community college students, nearly three times that of Virginia. I could go on, but I'd prefer using my time to fix rather than condemn my native state.

Virginia's policymakers will boast about our "Top State" selection. Who wouldn't? Of course, the only selection that really matters is where employers choose to invest. A simple web search for economic announcements will demonstrate just how poorly we fare; try it. CNBC, we thank you for the mention. Now, it's time we earn it.

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## 21ST-CENTURY ROADWAYS

### Driving Virginia's infrastructure into the future

With school out and summer in full swing, Virginians of all ages are ready for vacation. It's time for families to pack their bags, pile into the car and hit the highway in search of cooler weather, scenic views and an escape from their normal routines.

Unfortunately, Virginia's infrastructure systems are not fully prepared to handle an influx of summer road trips.

The Alliance for Innovation and Infrastructure recently explored America's top five infrastructure challenges and discovered that poor roadways lead to more than just vehicle repair costs. Our analysis found that 14% of Virginia's roads are in poor condition and the state has identified 6,395 bridges in need of repairs.

Roads and bridges in poor condition create dangerous traffic conditions that result in increased risk of fatalities, especially in rural areas that receive significantly less government funding for infrastructure updates than some of our cities.

With the economy slowly recovering following the pandemic and gas prices rising, most Virginians understandably would prefer to avoid additional costs associated with driving on degraded roads and bridges.

The American Society of Civil Engineers reported in Virginia's 2021 Infrastructure Report Card that on average, each driver pays \$517 per year in damages related to road conditions. Examples of poor road conditions include smaller issues such as potholes and damaged medians, but also larger and more concerning issues like structurally deficient bridges that are forced to have lower weight restrictions due to their age.

From the Appalachian Mountains to the Chesapeake Bay, many drivers this summer will traverse at least one of our state's 13,963 bridges. But, in 2020, the American Road and Transportation Builders Association identified 6,395 bridges in Virginia that need repairs, 577 of which were identified as "structurally deficient."

These bridges need necessary modernization in the form of replacement, widening and rehabilitation work to increase structural integrity. In fact, more than 50% of Virginia's bridges are past their 50-year anticipated service life.

Commitment to transportation safety, and infrastructure upkeep and modernization, must be prioritized by both federal and state governments if we want to avoid these hazards. Currently, Congress is debating numerous



JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

In June 2010, cars moved across the Mayo Bridge into downtown Richmond.

ways to invest in the country's infrastructure, including the largest dedicated investment in bridges in more than 50 years. However, it's far from certain what will be included in a final bill.

Virginia lawmakers also should seek solutions and consider utilizing a portion of the state's projected \$2 billion revenue surplus to increase infrastructure safety, resilience and reliability in both rural and urban areas.

Repair costs will continue to climb the longer infrastructure maintenance is delayed, making it critical that lawmakers consider significant funding from this year's revenue surplus for long-term, consistent infrastructure investment. Road and bridge conditions will worsen if we do not act soon, and with the state's population on the rise, it's imperative that Virginia prioritize transportation infrastructure now. Unmaintained roads and bridges will result in increased vehicle repair costs, traffic, dangerous conditions, environmental impacts and even fatalities.

It's time for our state and nation to take seriously the necessity to maintain and improve our transportation infrastructure. Options such as new legislation or considering ways to use the state's revenue surplus provide unique and rare opportunities to bring our state's roadways into the 21st century.

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