



*Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, Scaled Composites founder Burt Rutan, and astronaut Brian Binnie*

## **SpaceShipOne wins X Prize**

*Rutan designs, Allen pays, Binnie flies and Branson dreams big*

By Brian Riley

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It's 9:35 a.m. on Monday, Oct. 4, and I'm standing on the flight line of what is now called the "Mojave Spaceport." SpaceShipOne is being towed back to its hanger, and Brian Binnie, a new astronaut, is standing on top of the ship, smiling as he waves an American flag in a spirit of triumph and jubilation.

After the ship comes to a stop, Binnie hops off, and Burt Rutan gives an impromptu speech: "The last thing I told Brian was to use a driver, keep his head down and swing. Brian, that was a nice drive." The crowd cheered in response.

Referring to a previous aircraft he designed, which was the first plane ever to fly non-stop/non-refueled around the world in 1986, Rutan continued: “Voyager was an end. There was nothing practical about what Voyager did, but the important thing about today’s accomplishment is that this is not an end, it’s just a very good beginning.” More cheers and applause.

The crowd breaks up, and I find myself standing only a few feet away from Brian Binnie. I ask him if he would have his picture taken with me, and he kindly agrees. I feel a sense of awe and childlike wonder as we shake hands and I congratulate him. Binnie sees my wide-eyed appreciation, and I notice that he, too, seems to have a twinkle in his eye as he smiles and glances back. What a rush it was to be standing there with him on such a historic occasion, standing so close to SpaceShipOne that I could reach out and touch it if I wanted to.

As we turned to go into the hanger, further evidence of Rutan’s genius was sitting behind us in the form of White Knight, SpaceShipOne’s unorthodox-looking mothership. It was huge, filling up the space inside with its wings hanging only a few feet over our heads.

Burt’s father, George Rutan, walked over and introduced himself to the sponsor of the SpaceShipOne project, Paul Allen, as a few of us stood nearby, saying: “Burt, ever since he was small, was different. He would sit and look out the window, and I’d say, ‘What are you doing?’”

It was easy to come away with the impression that Rutan, in spirit, is every bit the same kid who designed his own model airplanes years ago. When I got the chance to ask him whether he thought he was still just a big kid, he ignored my question, quickly turned away and kept signing autographs. I thought to myself, “Isn’t that what an actual kid would have done?” as I watched him jubilantly bounce around the crowd.

Burt Rutan’s granddaughter, Whitney Davis, asked her youthful grandpa to autograph the souvenir T-shirt that she was wearing. At the age of seventeen, she had a very mature grasp of the significance of the events of the day. When I asked her for a quote, she spoke about the advancement of space technology: “It’s time for people to stop relying on the government to push the envelope.” Later, her proud grandfather explained to a well-wisher that Whitney was born while the Voyager was over the Philippines on its historic flight.

It was a day for the kids and the spirit of youthful optimism. Sir Richard Branson was there, speaking about his new Virgin Galactic company and how he has made a deal with Rutan to design a fleet of “spaceliners” that will take ordinary people into space. He’s going to take all the profits from that venture and reinvest them in space travel, doing it “for the kids,” he said. He speculated that there might even be a “moon hotel” someday in the future. I asked him if he felt like he was just a big kid like Rutan. He answered: “Absolutely. Peter Pan is my favorite theatrical. I never want to grow up.” He flashed me a huge grin as he backed up and politely broke away.

Mike Melvill, the world’s first commercial astronaut, who piloted White Knight earlier in the day, chatted with me, saying, “I’ve always been a big kid.” Brian Binnie gave his take on feeling and acting young: “I think you have to have some of that in you to play in this arena.” Paul Allen, who financed the SpaceShipOne project, explained his view: “Well, you never want to

grow up completely, do you? You want to keep some of the kid inside you. You have to stay young at heart.”

Fourteen-year-old Jesse Basham, son of maintenance electrician Ken Basham, who works for Rutan, spent the afternoon collecting autographs from as many people as he could find who worked on the SpaceShipOne project, finally ending up with over 200 names. “I’m going to be famous someday, too,” he proudly declared, and was happy to sign his name in my notebook.

Earlier in the day, when SpaceShipOne was high overhead, gliding back down to earth, I watched it float past a majestic daytime moon, and I thought of the movie “E.T.” and how the boy in the story floated on his bicycle past the glowing disk of a yellow moon. I looked up at SpaceShipOne and thought, “That’s Burt Rutan up there, riding his bike across the sky for the whole world to see.” It surely was. Godspeed, Burt Rutan.

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*The author, at the Mojave Spaceport*



See also: [SpaceShipOne](#) (exhibit at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum).

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