

St. Catherine's graduate signs up for trip to Mars

BY BILL McKELWAY • Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, November 8, 2015 10:30 pm

At 27 years old, well into a film career in Los Angeles and romantically involved, Mead McCormick is hardly at a point in life to contemplate her bucket list.

But McCormick — a world traveler who graduated from St. Catherine's School in Richmond 10 years ago, grew up mostly in Williamsburg and holds degrees from the University of Chicago and the California Institute of the Arts — is leading two lives.

“It's like there are two parallel universes that I'm living at the same time,” she said.

One life includes the career, the boyfriend and long days of studio work in Los Angeles making movie trailers for a company appropriately called Trailer Park, which did work on “Jurassic World” and “Avatar.”

The other pursuit, if successful, will lead to her death on Mars.

McCormick is one of 100 volunteers, selected from more than 200,000 applicants worldwide, hoping to make the cut next year that will leave her among the 24 people chosen to travel to Mars — one way. In groups of four, spaced months apart, they would become the first settlers of a planet that is 36 million miles farther from the sun than Earth and where the atmosphere is mostly carbon dioxide.

Temperatures range from nearly 200 degrees below zero to a balmy 77 above. But as they say in southerly orbits: it isn't the heat that'll kill you, it's the radiation.

No technology now exists to return the Marsnauts to Earth, meaning that the 24 winners will not be coming home again barring the development of a transport vehicle capable of leaving Mars and sustaining the crew for the months-long return voyage.

“It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience,” McCormick said. “There is no way I can pass up the opportunity to



20151109_MET_MARS

Mead McCormick, a St. Catherine's graduate in 2005 and from Williamsburg. She is one of 100 finalists in a competition to be among the first 24 colonists to travel to Mars in another 12 years.

tell a story firsthand that is the greatest adventure in the history of mankind.”

Some finalists already are being asked if they would revert to cannibalism if food production systems fail.

But McCormick sees herself in the role of a Columbus exploring a new world, camera in hand and with the opportunity to record an experience that makes the moon landing in 1969 a pale predecessor. It would be a larger first step for man and longer leap for mankind, although McCormick admits she isn't working on an inaugural statement once her space vehicle touches down.

“At first it seemed more like an idea for a film and a fun question to ask people to see if they would actually consider it,” McCormick said, recalling her reaction when she first heard of the opportunity in 2013 and figured millions of people would apply. “The more people who blatantly rejected the idea, the more I realized that I was the weird one: I thought it was an exciting idea.

“I felt an obligation to apply and I felt proud to be just a part of the whole thing. It's a big step in human history that's happening right now and I wanted to participate.”

The privately promoted and as-yet unfunded Mars voyage is receiving worldwide publicity and comes with no endorsement or involvement from government agencies. It is the brainchild of a Dutch businessman who is determined to create the first manned colony on a planet that has been suspected of harboring life forms since the shining reddish orb first came into view of a telescope.

Timing is not everything, but the planets seem oddly aligned in some vague conjunction for the so-called Mars One project. “The Martian,” the hit movie starring Matt Damon about a stranded astronaut, couldn't have arrived at a more opportune time.

And just two months ago it was determined by NASA scientists that flowing briny water exists on the planet, already known for its polar ice caps, metal-laden surface and riverbed-like channels. Some scientists and scores of fiction writers have theorized that the planet once harbored life.

The coincidences haven't allayed skeptics, who see the Mars settlement plan as a pie-in-the-sky pipe dream.

Government space agencies are barely acknowledging the effort, according to news reports, and the Dutch businessman behind the effort admits he is still trying to find investors. The selection process has been underway since 2013 and McCormick, who says she is a distant relative of the Virginia-born inventor of the grain reaper, Cyrus McCormick, says she is fully engaged and ready to travel.

Her grandfather helped develop the jet pack for NASA and her mother and father have traveled the world

experiencing different cultures, including a two-year stint in Siberia when McCormick's dad worked with the United States Agency for International Development. Mead, an only child, was 7 at the time.

"She learned to write cursive in Russian before she learned how to in English," said her mother, Christy, a lawyer who worked for years in the Virginia Attorney General's office and is now a U.S. Department of Justice lawyer involved in voting oversight.

The family lived in Barnaul, in western Siberia, a city of more than 700,000 people but with just a handful of Americans. "There was my family and some missionaries and that was about it," McCormick said of the two-year stint.

The Siberian venture and others around the world established an independence and confidence in McCormick, who says her adaptability and comfort in distant lands seems to have always been a given. When she landed in India for her first trip there, she learned at the airport that her contact person had died that morning.

"It was a pretty good lesson in how to get along when your plans fall apart in a distant land," she said.

"I seem to have the ability to get along wherever I am. I don't have trouble fitting in," she said, conceding that her father has jokingly mentioned abducting her if she makes the final cut for the Mars trip.

Scheduled to begin in 2026, the Mars voyage is to involve sending six teams of four volunteers over a period of several years. McCormick and the other 23 voyagers, tentatively scheduled to be selected next fall, would go on the Mars One payroll for a 10-year training and project development period.

Critical first steps involve the robotic placement of housing modules on Mars and the selection of the first four voyagers.

Profiles of all 100 finalists range from decorated war veterans to housewives to athletes and scientists, all of whom harbor a thirst for adventure that seems to overshadow the certainty of death.

And it turns out that McCormick has a bucket list after all: "I'd love to see Australia and New Zealand, the Nordic countries, Japan and Antarctica, to name a few," she wrote in an email. "I'd love to create and run my own TV show someday. And I'd like to have a kid someday."

There is still time for all of that, of course, even if McCormick makes the final cut. And there's nothing to stop a bit of cross-pollination.

There is the promise from organizers that part of the objective of the Mars settlement is to allow the

settlers to develop their own life plans, their own rules of order, their own manner of survival.

And it all will become part of a reality television production, a made-for-TV serial with story lines that far surpass what current-day versions of survivalist-themed productions offer. All beamed back to Earth.

“It’s all making me look at my life in a somewhat different lens but until the time comes that I make the final cut, I’m following my dream the way I’ve always wanted it to be,” McCormick said.

So there are the two worlds. One based in Los Angeles and the other awaiting on Mars. The fork in the road draws closer but there is no significant difference between either path because they both offer an adventure that she will be part of: either on Earth or on Mars.

There is also this reality: what could look better on a résumé than a bullet point noting that you were among the 24 people selected from a worldwide population chosen to travel to Mars.

It also makes a grand ice-breaker when the conversation lags at parties. McCormick says her friends jump in with the tantalizing Mars information when things slow down among strangers.

“I don’t bring it up myself,” McCormick said.

Her mom recalls another side of daughter that is more down to Earth. “She is totally caring when it comes to others,” Christy McCormick said.

“Mead wanted to go to Toys R Us when we got back home from Russia and when we went and she saw the stacks of toys, floor-to-ceiling, she fell to the ground in tears. She said she couldn’t believe there was so much when all of her friends back in Russia had nothing.”