

Marleen Martinez, 28, lives in Littleton, Colorado and is a Spacecraft Test Engineer working for Lockheed Martin. She was on the team that launched the GRAIL Mission Spacecraft and is now working on the GOES-R satellites for NOAA and NASA. This is a dream-come-true job for Marleen who received her B.S. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Washington in 2006.

You're the first rocket scientist to be interviewed for the Family Portrait series. How did you become interested in pursuing this unusual career?

My mom says the first time I talked about it I was five. She has a video of me singing a solo in a song called 'Mission Control' with friends in kindergarten. I may be small but I'm growing... space is waiting for me.

In middle school my principal offered me the opportunity to enter an essay contest for the migrant students (children of migrant workers). Washington State was sending two students to the U.S. Space Academy in Huntsville, Alabama for a one-week training. I was one of the winners. We trained as astronauts — doing everything they do including the one-sixth gravity chair that simulates the moon. I remember thinking "This is what I want to do with my life!"

When were you diagnosed with TS?

The first time wasn't a definitive diagnosis. It was when I was in Mexico. The doctor told my mother that I had 'tics' and that they would go away as I got older. She didn't bother telling me. 'Tics' wasn't in her vocabulary. She called them mañas — which translates into 'habits' not tics. Maybe all that time, she really did think they were habits, because she would continually tell me to stop, thinking I would.

When I was 17, I was reading an article about Neve Campbell in a teen magazine. That was in 2000 and that's when I discovered that I had TS. I told my mom and she said she'd known for ten years, but didn't think I needed to know, because she was told the tics would go away.

Do you think that your TS has had an impact on your career?

I don't think it has and I haven't let it. The people at work don't realize I have TS until I tell them about it. I have remnants of the bad tics, but it was much worse when I was a kid. I still can't control my nose and eyes, but I can control most of the rest, so I'm not hunching my shoulders and stretching my neck anymore. I'm left with twitching my nose, eye tics and a twitching pinky. No one seems to notice my hands — except friends who see my hands on the steering wheel when I'm driving.

At work I sit by myself. I've never gotten special treatment. I think TS has given me 'hyper-focus.' Nothing distracts me. When I'm studying — I'm studying. When I'm watching TV — I'm watching TV. Even when I'm twitching, I'm focused. That focus has helped a lot at school and at work.

How did your family and friends react to your TS while you were growing up?

No one but my mother was bothered with it, and everyone just got used to it. She was the one who told me to stop all the time. My dad was a farm worker. He was up at sunrise and back at sundown. He didn't bother telling me to stop. My siblings were fine, too.

My older sister had one tic — rubbing her fingers together. Then I started doing it. That's how I got that tic. My little brother had one tic too — he hunched his left shoulder. But I don't think either of them has TS, although I think my brother may have OCD.

For about a year I had palilalia, which is the repetition of the last thing you've said. I was a freshman and I was on the volleyball team. I heard my cousin talking to one of the seniors on the team and described me as 'the short freshman who repeats everything she says.' I usually tried to cover the palilalia with a joke. No one talked to me about it then.

When I went back to my hometown, Wharton, to speak at an assembly at the school about TS, I asked my old math teacher about it. He said he'd noticed. Some of the teachers knew what it was, but it wasn't an issue for them. I was a good student and they had no problems with me so it wasn't a big deal. They didn't know that at the time, I didn't know that it was TS.

What do you think of the media's image of people with TS?

I ran into a problem with that in my junior year of college. It was the first and only time I broke down when someone was talking about TS. I was in the 'Aero' Department's Lounge studying with three friends. Two of them knew I had TS, but the third didn't. He started talking about cursing out loud in the movie "Deuce Bigelow."

I wasn't going to bring up my TS and just hoped he'd stop talking, but for some reason he just



wouldn't drop the subject. I got frustrated waiting for one of my other friends to say something and I just couldn't face telling him. It hurt me. I didn't want to confront him and I didn't want to listen to him either. So I left.

I was sitting in the hallway crying and one of my other friends came out to calm me down. She said they'd explained and he'd apologized. Cursing was what he thought TS was.

Now, when that happens, I will try to explain it. But some people still think TS is just cursing out loud. I work in a TS camp and out of 100 people, three kids had it, but coprolalia is still what people know about TS.

Do you have any advice for aspiring scientists with TS?

I can only advise on what I've experienced. I'd say — stay in school! It's a cliché, but it's important. Also, if you know what you want to do, don't let anyone stop you. I remember my older sister telling me that I had to have back-ups and not to throw all my eggs in one basket. Even the people closest to me worried when I said I wanted to be an astronaut and thought I couldn't do it — that just made me want it more.

College is a good four or five years and it's important to take it one day at a time. Have a long-term plan, but focus most on your short-term plan — one class at a time. When you're a freshman focus on those freshman classes and not on the classes you'll have as a senior. Later on, you'll realize that time flew by. Creating the short-term plan and going day-to-day is key. ▣