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Cosmos Couture

By ALLEN P. ROBERTS Jr. - 12/18/2006

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While billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson battle to find a way to get people into space affordably, Rick Tumlinson wants to make sure they look good when they get there.

Tumlinson thinks the clunky, off-white spacesuits NASA uses leave a lot to be desired and should be a little more stylish. So the L.A. businessman has joined forces with Hollywood prop designer Chris Gilman, who won an Academy Award for a suit designed for a movie (and whose Global Effects costume and prop design firm was profiled by the Business Journal last year).

The duo have started Orbital Outfitters to develop and manufacture the first generation of space suits designed for private space travel.

“You want to talk about the highest of high-end couture, this is it,” Tumlinson joked. “If you’re going to pay all that money to get up there, you might as well look good when you get there.”

There’s good reason Tumlinson has hooked up with Gilman. The North Hollywood costume designer’s suits are so accurate and well crafted that his company was hired by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to fabricate a prototype for a next-generation space suit in 2000.

But this venture goes one, big step beyond – into developing a functioning suit that can protect travelers from the all-too-real radiation, drastic temperature changes and space vacuum that can kill them.

The pair refuse to disclose how much money they are plowing into their venture. But their newly formed Hollywood company already claims a customer: XCOR Aerospace, a maker of high-performance rockets – and one of a handful of companies striving to make a space tourism business viable.

It has commissioned Orbital Outfitters to make a suit for its test pilot and former Space Shuttle astronaut Richard Searfoss, as the company nears the testing stage for one of its rockets. Only three companies in the world make spacesuits and they all go to NASA and other governments, with the average cost for one between \$500,000 and \$1 million.

“The spacesuit is an essential part of any legitimate test but the bureaucracy and cost that comes along with getting what’s out there on the market now makes getting one an expensive hassle,” said Rich Pournelle, a XCOR spokesman. “Cutting cost while keeping quality is the key and Rick has figured out how to do that.”

Orbital Outfitters is developing prototypes. Tumlinson said when finished, a fully functioning suit can be safely used for six months. The suits will be custom-made and feature systems that monitor vital signs and capture bodily waste. The expected cost is about \$50,000 and \$80,000, but could rent to space tourists for \$3,000 and \$7,000 per mission.

“Everyone in the (private) space industry is working on ways to cut costs,” said Marco Caceres, a space analyst with Washington D.C.-based Teal Group, who is certain a private space industry will develop. “There are about a dozen or so spacecraft out there ready to test, and every one of their crew members is going to need a suit. If someone introduces a suit for an affordable price, there will be a market out there for them.”

Tumlinson also sees opportunities to branch out in to other businesses connected to space tourism. In addition to the suits, Orbital Outfitters plans to offer safety training and medical evaluation services to clear passengers to fly.

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