

# Reaching for the Stars

*Two decades after the space shuttle Challenger tragedy, the legacy of the woman who would have been the first “Teacher in Space” lives on*

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

In an interview with *USA Today* a few days before the launch of the space shuttle *Challenger* in early 1986, Christa McAuliffe was asked how she would feel as she sat waiting for takeoff.

“It’s kind of like the first time you go on a carnival ride,” the 37-year-old replied. “You’ve said, ‘I’ve got enough courage,’ and you’re really excited about doing this and conquering your fears.”

For the woman who’d been selected from nearly 11,500 applicants to be the first “Teacher in Space,” the importance of the mission superseded any concerns she may have had for her personal safety.

“A lot of people thought it was over when we reached the moon. They put space on the back burner,” said McAuliffe, then a mother of two young children. “But people have a connection with teachers. ... My message to everyone will be that space is for everybody. It’s not just for a select group of astronauts.”

Days later, on January 28, 1986, in a horrific moment that remains indelibly etched in the minds of a generation of Americans, the mission that had started out with such high hopes met its tragic end just 73 seconds after launch. As a stunned nation and its schoolchildren looked on, the *Challenger* exploded in the Florida sky above Cape Canaveral, killing all seven crew members aboard.

“I don’t think it was that we didn’t understand something very horrible had happened,” McAuliffe’s mother, Grace Corrigan, told CNN after the disaster. “I think it was the fact that we didn’t want to believe it.”

For McAuliffe’s family (including husband, Steve, son, Scott, 8, and daughter, Caroline, 5), for her social studies students at Concord High in New Hampshire, and for millions of others who felt they’d come to know her in the year leading up to the launch, the death of the effervescent young teacher was indeed impossible to fathom. McAuliffe, with her easy grin and curly brown hair, had been so alive,



radiating an infectious excitement about her looming space adventure, about the many opportunities the space industry would one day open up for students.

Her motto: “I touch the future. I teach.”

For a woman who made history, Christa McAuliffe’s childhood was pleasantly unremarkable. The oldest of five, born to Edward and Grace Corrigan, she grew up in Framingham, Mass., where she was active in the Girl Scouts, played the piano and was a pitcher on her parish softball team. Christa was 13 in February 1962 when John Glenn and *Friendship 7* made history by orbiting the Earth three times before landing in the Atlantic. On the bus the next day, she marveled about the flight with her friend Barbara Cmar Eldridge. “Do you realize that someday people will be going to the moon? Maybe even taking a bus, and I want to do that!”

Christa dated Steve McAuliffe throughout high school and college and the couple married soon after she graduated from Framingham State College. They moved to Washington, D.C., so that Steve could attend Georgetown University Law Center, and there Christa taught social studies and American history and earned her master’s degree at Bowie State. In 1978, the young family moved to Concord, N.H., and Christa quickly found her way back into the classroom, teaching first at Bow Memorial School and later at Concord High.

McAuliffe was a popular teacher who worked hard to make course material relevant. She used the New

Hampshire driver's handbook as a basis for one of her English courses, and developed a new course on the role and history of women in the United States. Wherever she taught, she was known as the "queen of the field trips."

Friends and family urged her to apply for the "Teacher in Space" program when it was announced in 1984. She did, barely making the deadline. To her amazement, she was named one of 114 semifinalists, and then made the final 10. McAuliffe felt strongly about who should land the coveted spot. "Historically, teaching and nursing are among the few professions that have not been dominated by men," she said. "If you're going to choose someone to represent teachers as a whole, I think you should be truly representative. You should choose a woman."

Ultimately, NASA officials decided that McAuliffe was the perfect candidate to rekindle the excitement of a nation that had, by the mid-1980s, grown complacent about space travel. And rekindle she did. She quickly gained a rapport with the media, doing hundreds of newspaper and TV interviews; she made the talk show circuit and was named a hero of the year by CNN and was a presenter at the 1985 Emmy Awards. In Houston, TV crews captured her floating, all smiles, in the weightlessness of a KC-135 as she and her crewmates went through astronaut training.

On board the *Challenger* (what she dubbed "the ultimate field trip"), McAuliffe was to conduct two lessons that would be transmitted back to Earth—covering how life is lived aboard a space shuttle and describing how spaceflight works.

Tragically, of course, she never got to give those lessons.

But her legacy lives on. Today, more than 40 schools around the world bear her name and countless scholarships have been set up to perpetuate her zeal for learning. In Framingham, the Christa McAuliffe Center gives middle school students a chance to simulate spaceflight in a full-size, interactive mockup of Houston's Mission Control; the center also provides workshops and science curriculum for teachers and offers original programming for the nearby Framingham State College Planetarium.

McAuliffe's children are now grown. Scott recently finished his graduate studies in marine biology and got married. Caroline, like her mother before her, is a teacher.

Grace Corrigan continues to work to keep her daughter's memory alive. "[Christa] left a fabulous legacy," she said, on the 20th anniversary of the tragedy. "It's making people feel good about themselves, making kids feel they're important, making teachers be proud of themselves and knowing that if you really want something, all you have to do is work hard, you can do it, achieve it. Reach for the stars." ■

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