

After the Shock, a Need to Share Grief and Loss

By SARA RIMER

The nation came together yesterday in a moment of disaster and loss. Wherever Americans were when they heard the news — at work, at school or at home — they shared their grief over the death of the seven astronauts, among them one who had captured their imaginations, Christa McAuliffe, the teacher from Concord, N.H., who was to have been the first ordinary citizen to go into space.

Shortly before noon, when the first word of the explosion came, daily events seemed to stop as people awaited the details and asked the same questions: "What happened? Are there any survivors?"

In offices, restaurants and stores, people gathered in front of television sets, mesmerized by the terrible scene of the shuttle exploding, a scene that would be replayed throughout the day and night. Children who had learned

about Mrs. McAuliffe were watching in classrooms across the country.

It seemed to be one of those moments, enlarged and frozen, that people would remember and recount for the rest of their lives — what they were doing and where they were when they heard that the space shuttle Challenger had exploded. The need to reach out, to speak of disbelief and pain, was everywhere. Family members telephoned

one another, friends telephoned friends.

"It was like the Kennedy thing," said John Hannan, who heard the news when his sister called him at his office, a personnel recruiting concern in Philadelphia. "Everyone was numb."

'I Felt Very Close to Her'

Florine Israel, a legal secretary at the New York Civil Liberties Union, echoed the sentiments of many who spoke of Mrs. McAuliffe not as an astronaut but as a friend. "I felt very close to her," she said. "She was ordinary people. She was a mother, a working woman. I felt like I was a part of it."

The image of the shuttle exploding flashed across 100 television sets in the electronics department of Macy's, in midtown Manhattan, where a crowd of workers from nearby offices and facto-

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Francis R. Scobee
Commander



Michael J. Smith
Pilot



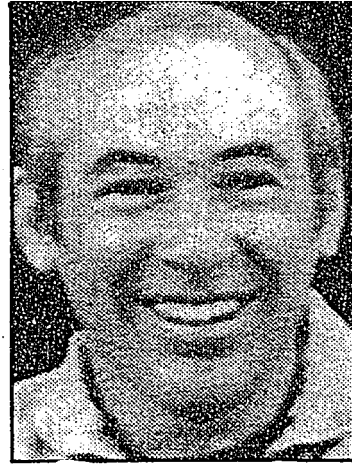
Judith A. Resnik
Electrical Engineer



Ellison S. Onizuka
Engineer



Ronald E. McNair
Physicist



Gregory B. Jarvis
Electrical Engineer



Christa McAuliffe
Teacher

After the Shock, Children's Questions and a Need to Share the Grief

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ries spent their lunch hours. "You just think of that teacher in there," said a tearful Tom Uzzo, who works for a blouse manufacturer.

Across the nation, people cried openly. "People were crying in my court," said Chief Judge Seymour Gelber of Dade County Juvenile Court in Miami. "We had become so accustomed to perfection in this space program that many simply believed it couldn't happen to us."

At Philadelphia's High School for Engineering and Science, teachers watched the liftoff in the office of the principal, Dr. Alvin I. Garblik. "Everyone was speechless," Dr. Garblik, said later. "It was such a spectacular thing. It was lifting, lifting, lifting and just went bingo — it was gone."

Flags were flown at half staff, and moments of silence were shared. The news came particularly hard at P.S. 332, an elementary school in Brooklyn. The children had learned all about Mrs. McAuliffe, an ebullient wife and mother of two who taught a class called "the American Woman" at Concord High. Thrilled that a teacher was to be-

come the first ordinary citizen in space, Mrs. McAuliffe had become the children's heroine — "the teacher-naut."

At 1 P.M., only after she was certain beyond a doubt that word of the disaster was true, Jeanette Reed-Clarke, the assistant principal at P.S. 332, announced the news over the public address system as gently as possible.

"Sadly, I must inform you that at 11:38 the shuttle exploded, with all the crew members, including Mrs. McAuliffe, our first teacher-naut," she said. She called for a moment of silence and said that radios would be tuned to news programs in all the classrooms.

"You mean, she's no longer alive?" asked several children in Toni Weinstein's sixth grade class, where they had been watching a special videotape about Mrs. McAuliffe at the moment the shuttle exploded.

A Sixth Grader's Poem

In Chicago, at the Newberry Academy, a public elementary school, a sixth grader named Celina Gonzalez was moved to compose a poem eulogizing Mrs. McAuliffe — "First Teacher in Space:"

*Even though I didn't know her,
I feel as if she was my friend.
So please God,
Please take good care of her and her
companions.*

As Bernie Bradley, 38 years old, broke the news to his fifth graders at the Newberry Academy, he was filled with memories of the day President Kennedy was assassinated. "I compared today to Nov. 22, 1963 when I was in a high school Latin class," he said. "I told them they will remember this day forever."

Need to Talk of Accident

Sidney Davidson, an equipment manufacturer from Bedford, N.Y., was a passenger yesterday morning on Delta Air Lines Flight 766 from Fort Myers, Fla., to Atlanta. The passengers had what Mr. Davidson described as "a great view of what looked like a magnificent takeoff."

Nobody realized that anything had gone wrong, he said. But a few minutes later, the pilot made an announcement. "He said, 'We regret to inform you that there has been a malfunction in the launching, and it appears that every-

one is lost.' There were gasps, and then everyone on the plane was very quiet."

Again and again, people said they had begun to think of space shuttle flights as routine, almost without risk. "It had become almost commonplace," Mrs. Israel, the legal secretary, said. "It was like riding the F train."

Some people suggested that there was a lesson in the disaster. "Maybe it isn't appropriate for regular people to go into space at this time," said Susan Alexander, a representative of the Wilderness Society, who was on a visit to Washington from her home in Alaska.

At Nevada Union High School, in Grass Valley, Calif., friends and relatives called Chris Owen, a woodworking teacher who had hoped to become the first teacher in space.

"They were thankful that I'm earth-bound," a shaken Mr. Owen said. "I feel like I lost someone in my family, too."

But even yesterday's explosion did not dampen his desire to visit space. "I'd go tomorrow if they'd give me a seat," he said.