

BOOK ONE

THE SHUTTLE SAGA



THE CHALLENGER:
TRIUMPH, TRAGEDY
AND TRANSITION





CHAPTER 3

Challenger

7

'This is just the beginning'

Christa McAuliffe wanted to make space come alive for children who someday would inherit it. She compared space to America's Western frontier. '(But) the West had an end. Space doesn't.'

By Joan Heller

The first name on the birth certificate was Sharon, but the world would remember this frail baby girl as Christa.

Struggling to make a start for little Christa and the son and daughter who would come later, Grace and Ed Corrigan took their baby home to a cold-water apartment in a Boston housing project. With Ed still in college, \$23 was all the rent they could manage in September 1948.

The struggle grew harder as the baby got sicker. First threatened by asthma, Christa's life soon would be endangered by a stomach ailment that left her dangerously dehydrated.

Hope came in the form of a new antibiotic administered to the dying 6-month-old Christa. It worked, and the little girl flourished.

The good times got better as graduation day came for Ed. The life of an accountant would be easier, and there would be extras only dreamed of in the hard days — a comfortable home in nearby Framingham and tuition for Christa to attend a Catholic school.

At Marian High School, the girls all dressed alike — blue plaid skirt, white blouse, blue blazer. But they didn't ask the questions Christa asked. Sister Lee Hogan remembers Christa for the probing questions she asked about her favorite subjects: American history and American government.

"We used to have discussions about people who had made history — 'Did times make the man or did man make the times?' Christa believed ordinary people made history," Sister Lee Hogan said.

Christa played basketball on the school team and sang the part of Marguerite when the school staged "The Sound of Music." And in her sophomore year, she met Steve McAuliffe. Twenty years later, friends would remember the high school romance that was for keeps.

Christa's enthusiasm for school didn't wane when the last bell rang on her senior year in 1966. From there, she went to Framingham State College to earn a teaching degree.

The wedding that high school classmates had predicted came off, and the McAuliffes moved to Maryland as Steve pursued a law degree.

Christa faced her first class — eighth-graders studying American history — at Benjamin Foulis Junior High School in Morningside, Md.

The next year, she moved on to Thomas Johnson Junior High in nearby Lanham, where she would stay for seven years.

Arriving as a novice teacher, she left as a master's degree graduate of Bowie State College, a practiced classroom veteran and the mother of 21-month-old toddler Scott Corrigan McAuliffe.

Back home in New England with her lawyer husband, Christa taught at Bundlett Junior High School in Concord, N.H., and awaited the birth of the couple's second child — Caroline Corrigan McAuliffe. She took off a year to care for Caroline and 3-year-old Scott, then returned to the classroom in September 1980 at Bow Memorial High School in Concord.

During the next three years, Christa would move to still another school, Concord High, and tackle four subjects: two new — economics and law; one familiar — American history; and one she created — "the American woman."

The days were full. There were children at home and more children in the classroom. There were meetings of the Junior Service League to attend, Christian doctrine classes to teach at St. Peter's Church, fund-raisers to organize for Concord Hospital and projects to attend to for the Concord YMCA.

But, a few brief moments of television changed Christa's life. The president was on the screen, talking about sending a teacher into space as the first civilian aboard the Shuttle.

Christa wanted to be the first of the first. Firing off her application, she wrote about challenges and about making space come alive for the children who would someday inherit it.

Her letter landed on a pile of 10,463 others. In June 1985, there were 10 finalists. A month later, it all came down to Christa.

Summoned to the White House with her nine fellow finalists, Christa was told minutes before Vice President George Bush told the nation. With the broad smile that would become her trademark, Christa told waiting reporters, "I'm still kind of floating. I don't know when I'll come down to Earth, but I feel wonderful."

Five days later, the pride and joy of Concord High was riding in a parade back home. Soon she would say goodbye and head into four months of tough training at the Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Delighted with the smiling teacher from New England, the news media came en masse to meet Christa. Patiently smiling through one photo session after another, she talked about her love for teaching and the possibilities of space.

"I want to demystify space," she would say. Breaking training long enough to see a launch for herself, Christa traveled to Kennedy Space Center in October 1985 to see the Space Shuttle Challenger carry Spacelab into orbit.

Teachers in classrooms throughout the nation prepared their students for the three lessons she would beam from space via the Public Broadcasting Service.

Finally, launch day came. Christa was handed a shiny red apple as she climbed aboard the doomed Challenger, and she was off to conquer space for the little ones.

In 74 seconds, she was gone. "I really feel that this is just the beginning, like the early days of the opening of America's Western frontier," she had said.

"(But) the West had an end. Space doesn't."



The Associated Press

FAMILY PORTRAIT: Christa McAuliffe; her husband, Steven; and their children, Caroline, 5, and Scott, 8, pose for a picture outside their Concord home July 20, the day after Christa was selected as the first citizen Shuttle astronaut.



United Press International

NATURAL LEADER: Amid Concord, N.H., residents' cheers, McAuliffe leads the Nevvers Band during a hometown celebration Aug. 6. Band director Paul Giles lends a hand.