

McAuliffe remains vivid to still-grieving NH city

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In this 1986 file photo, Christa McAuliffe, left, and Barbara Morgan, right, laugh during training. A whole generation _ including McAuliffe's own students _ has grown up since McAuliffe and six other astronauts perished on live TV on Jan. 28, 1986, a quarter century ago on Friday, Jan. 28, 2011. Now the former schoolchildren who loved her are making sure that people who weren't even born then know about McAuliffe and her dream of going into space. (AP Photo/NASA, File)

(AP) -- In the 25 years since the Challenger exploded on liftoff, Felicia Brown has gone to college, become a psychologist, gotten married and had kids. Fresh in her mind, though, is the memory of Christa McAuliffe, a teacher at her high school and family friend who was to be the first teacher in space.

"I know how important her field trip into space was to her and how

much she hoped to learn and share with [students](#) everywhere," said the Concord High School graduate, who at 43 is now older than McAuliffe was when she died at age 37. "I wouldn't want her sincerity to get lost in a textbook."

A whole generation - including McAuliffe's own students - has grown up since McAuliffe and six other astronauts perished on live TV on Jan. 28, 1986, a quarter century ago this Friday. Now the former schoolchildren who loved her are making sure that people who weren't even born then know about McAuliffe and her dream of going into space.

Students who didn't know her now will when they attend a new school named in her honor.

Concord, a city of about 42,000 where the popular McAuliffe taught social studies, carries her legacy as a source of both fierce pride and painful memory. Some locals had mixed feelings when the name of space pioneer Alan Shepard, a New Hampshire native, was added to a planetarium originally named just for McAuliffe. Some people still tear up at the mention of her name.

But in ways both quiet and public, the city she left behind is making sure she lives on where her husband still resides, her children grew up and her remains are buried.

Brown didn't have McAuliffe as a teacher, but was a family friend and baby-sat for her children. Last spring, when her third-grade daughter had to work on a Concord history project, she encouraged her to devote it to McAuliffe.

Brown's mother, Carol Berry, was watching in person at [Cape Canaveral](#), Fla., when the Challenger blew up. She headed the children's division at the Concord Public Library and worked with McAuliffe on a space-

related reading program and had kept a scrapbook of the events leading to the shuttle launch and afterward. She helped with the project and talked to her granddaughter's class.

"It's difficult to have it all brought back to the forefront in my mind again," said Berry, 71. "Every year, I think about it again. I just feel so badly; it took away a lot of talent and what could've been a really wonderful project, experience."

Keeping McAuliffe's memory alive is also important to Holly Merrow, who graduated from Concord High in 1986 and now teaches in Portland, Maine. Merrow, taught by McAuliffe in a class about women in history, recalled that she made lessons fun, interesting and real - and she tries to do the same.

Merrow teaches third grade but for several years taught a lesson about McAuliffe and the Challenger to students in the fifth grade and in middle school. She showed them a scrapbook full of NASA stickers, as well as articles on the explosion and McAuliffe's selection by NASA, in which she was chosen from more than 11,000 applicants in a contest to be the first civilian teacher on a space flight.

"I teach with teachers who weren't even alive then," she said. She admits it's been hard going back in time to give those lessons, saying, "I just well up sometimes."

The space mission would have been the ultimate field trip for McAuliffe, who stressed real-world, hands-on experience, high school alumni recalled. She volunteered after school with the Youth and Government club, which sent students to the Statehouse each year for a mock Legislature.

Former club member Daniel St. Hilaire, 43, now has an 18-year-old son

and is on the state's Executive Council, which approves contracts and appointments. Long interested in astronomy, he worked at the planetarium in the 1990s and now is president of fundraising.

When he thinks about McAuliffe, he believes the most important lesson children can learn from her is to be involved in their community.

"A lot of people didn't realize that she had other interests. They always associate Christa with the space program," he said. "But really her love was for the kids and for involvement, and that's why she did the youth and government program. So the lesson learned here is to get involved, don't take a back seat, make a difference, and that's precisely what she did."

Brown and St. Hilaire were college freshmen at the time of the explosion and, like many other recent graduates, converged on their hometown seeking solace. Concord High held a special, private gathering in the gym.

Courtney Major, who graduated in 1988, was part of a Concord High class that was going to hear a lesson from McAuliffe from space and recalled the horror on students' faces - and the silence - when it became apparent the shuttle had exploded.

"It seemed like it took forever to find out if there was anybody alive," she said. The phones through which McAuliffe was supposed to conduct the lesson were quickly taken away.

Now 41, Major lives in Pittsburg, N.H., and takes cabin reservations in the Connecticut Lakes region. She has shared her McAuliffe memories with her children, including newspaper articles and an autographed picture.

The planetarium in Concord, the McAuliffe-Shepard Discovery Center, is holding a tribute to teachers on Friday, the night of the anniversary, followed by a program about McAuliffe.

The Concord school district has observed the anniversary quietly through the years. In a rare public comment, her husband, Steven McAuliffe, recently wrote a heartfelt letter to the board about the school being named after her.

"There is no honor that Christa would cherish more than to have her name associated with a school in the hometown that she loved so dearly," he wrote. "I hope generations of students, teachers and administrators who pass through the new school will be inspired by her most precious lesson - ordinary people can make extraordinary contributions when they remain true to themselves and follow their dreams."

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