

# Christa McAuliffe, still pioneering, is first woman with a statue on New Hampshire capitol grounds

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A statue of America's first teacher in space, Christa McAuliffe, who died when the space shuttle Challenger broke apart in 1986, is seen after its unveiling on what would've been her 76th birthday, Monday, Sept. 2, 2024, in Concord, N.H. Credit: AP Photo/Nick Perry

Decades after she was picked to be America's first teacher in space, Christa McAuliffe is still a pioneer—this time as the first woman to be memorialized on the grounds of New Hampshire's Statehouse, in the city where she taught high school.

McAuliffe was 37 when she was killed, one of the seven crew members aboard the Challenger when the space shuttle broke apart on live TV on Jan. 28, 1986. She didn't have the chance to give the lessons she had planned to teach from space. But people are still learning from her.

Benjamin Victor, the sculptor from Boise, Idaho, whose work was unveiled on Monday on what would have been McAuliffe's 76th birthday, said McAuliffe's "inspiration hasn't been lost in the disaster and her memory will go on forever."

Steven McAuliffe, her former husband, said Christa McAuliffe was proud to represent teachers and would be enthusiastic about being honored "as long as it was shared with all teachers and educators."

"It is a great honor for Christa. And at the same time it is a great and deserving honor for teachers and educators across this country," he said. "I hope teachers everywhere will come and see it. I hope they take pride in their noble work. I hope that students will come and see. And I hope that they will be inspired to pursue their dreams," he said.



This Sept. 26, 1985 photo made available by NASA shows astronaut Christa McAuliffe. Credit: NASA via AP

The 8-foot-tall (2.4-meter) bronze, depicting McAuliffe walking in stride in a NASA flight suit, is believed to be the first full statue of McAuliffe, known for her openness to experimental learning. Her motto was: "I touch the future, I teach."

Gov. Chris Sununu's [executive order](#) enabled the McAuliffe statue to join statues of leaders such as Daniel Webster, John Stark and President Franklin Pierce. He said Monday that he's eager for schoolchildren who visit the Statehouse each year to see the statue honoring "our hero teacher" and reflect on all that's possible.

McAuliffe was picked from among 11,000 candidates to be the first teacher and private citizen in space. Beyond a public memorial at the Statehouse plaza on Jan. 31, 1986, the Concord school district and the city, population 44,500, have observed the Challenger anniversary quietly through the years, partly to respect the privacy of her family. Christa and Steven McAuliffe's son and daughter were very young at the time she died and was buried in a local cemetery. Steven McAuliffe, who was then a lawyer and now is a federal judge, wanted the children to grow up in the community normally.



In this Sept. 13, 1985 file photo, Christa McAuliffe tries out the commander's seat on the flight deck of a shuttle simulator at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. Credit: AP Photo, File

But there are other memorials, dozens of schools and a library named for McAuliffe, as well as scholarships and a commemorative coin. A science museum in Concord is dedicated to her and to native son Alan Shepard, the first American in space. The auditorium is named for her at Concord High School, where she taught American history, law, economics and a self-designed course called "The American Woman." Students rush past a painting of her in her astronaut uniform.

In 2017-2018, two educators-turned-astronauts at the International Space Station recorded some of the lessons that McAuliffe had planned to teach, on Newton's laws of motion, liquids in microgravity, effervescence and chromatography. NASA then posted ["Christa McAuliffe's Lost Lessons"](#) online, a resource for students everywhere.

Victor, the sculptor, comes from a family of educators, including his mother, with whom he's shared a number of discussions about McAuliffe as he's worked on the statue—including his recollection of watching the Challenger disaster on television as a second-grader in Bakersfield, California.



In this 1985 file photo, high school teacher Christa McAuliffe rides with her children Caroline, left, and Scott during a parade down Main Street in Concord, N.H. Credit: AP Photo/Jim Cole, File

"My heart goes out to the family but there's a silver lining in all of this and that's what we're here to celebrate today. And that is that her lesson is continually taught," said Victor, who has sculpted four of the statues in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall, the most of any living artist.

The event on Monday also featured one of McAuliffe's students, Kris Coronis Jacques, who's now a teacher, along with a student essay winner, Nathaniel Dunlap, who said McAuliffe inspired him to "look out for all opportunities and take them," a chorus from Concord High School that sang "see the light, be the light;" and James Scully, chair of the commission tasked with creating the memorial in just 18 months.

Pam Melroy, NASA's deputy administrator, told the crowd that McAuliffe's death was not in vain and spurred advancements in spacecraft design, risk management and the safety of human space flight.





Space teacher Christa McAuliffe responds to a question at a press conference at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, Dec. 13, 1985. Credit: AP Photo/R.J. Carson, File



Teacher Christa McAuliffe smiles after she was suited up for her space flight at the Kennedy Space Center, Florida, Jan. 27, 1986. Credit: NASA via AP, File



The crew for the Space Shuttle Challenger flight 51-L leaves their quarters for the launch pad, Jan. 27, 1986, at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Front to back are Commander Francis Scobee, Mission Spl. Judith Resnik, Mission Spl. Ronald McNair, Payload Spl. Gregory Jarvis, Mission Spl. Ellison Onizuka, teacher Christa McAuliffe, and pilot Michael Smith. Credit: AP Photo/Steve Helber, File

"The statue will stand as a symbol of the resilient human spirit that Christa embodies, reminding us of both the risks and rewards of space exploration. Christa's impact on NASA transcends time. Her mission catalyzed change, leading to a safer, more inclusive and more educationally focused space program," she said.

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