

In 1985 I was selected from over 11,000 applicants to be the first teacher in space. Like outer space. In a rocket ship called Challenger. And was I up for it? You betcha! As a little girl I watched the Space Age being born. The day after John Glenn orbited the Earth in Friendship 7, I told a friend of mine at Marian High school in Framingham Massachusetts (that's where I grew up, Framingham), I told my friend that day, 'Do you realize that someday people will be going to the Moon? Maybe even take a bus?' I told her, 'I want to do that!' And here I was.

It was 1984 when President Reagan announced the Teacher in Space Project. NASA was planning to launch the first civilian ever into space, and they were looking specifically for an educator. An ordinary person, and a 'gifted teacher', who could communicate with students while in orbit. Now, I can't speak for the gifted part, but you can't get more ordinary than a New England girl from suburban Boston teaching high school Social Studies in Concord, New Hampshire. Teaching was my calling, and I loved my students. We took a lot of field trips, and I liked to bring in local guest speakers to emphasize the impact of ordinary people on history. I wanted my students to know that they were as important to the historical record as kings, politicians, or generals. That the experiences of regular people were the real historical barometer; they were the real heroes who shaped the world we lived in.

And I guess that NASA agreed. Because they chose me. Me and a back-up teacher named Barbara Morgan. We both took a year of absence from our teaching jobs to train for the Space Shuttle Program. NASA paid our salaries. While not a full-on member of the NASA Astronaut Corps, I was going to be part of the STS 51-L crew, conduct experiments and teach from space. I was scheduled to present two fifteen-minute classes, including a tour of the space craft called The Ultimate Field Trip and a lesson in the benefits of space travel called 'Where We've Been'. The lessons would be broadcast from space to millions of schoolchildren via closed-circuit TV. I mean, can you imagine! I was also looking forward

to keeping a personal journal of my adventure in space, like the diaries of the women on the Conestoga wagons who pioneered the west.

Leading up to the launch date I got to be a guest on all the major TV network and news programs. When Johnny Carson asked me my thoughts about my mission, on the 'Tonight Show', I told him, 'If you're offered a seat on a rocket ship, don't ask what seat. Just get on.' So I did! The launch was on January 28th 1986: the culmination of a year of training and a lifetime of dreams. My heart was soaring. No trepidation whatsoever. The air was crisp. The sun was shining. I saw the massive rocket in front of me on the launch pad. Everyone was cheering. It was like a movie, only it was for real. This was really happening. This was happening to me. I was going to be the first civilian ever in space!

The other six crew members and I boarded the Challenger, we strapped ourselves in, did a routine safety check and at exactly 11:38am, the rocket took off. The power, the noise, the adrenaline, the force. There are no words. Seventy-three seconds later at an altitude of 48,000 feet, the shuttle broke apart and exploded in a ball of fire; while the world, and my husband, and my own children and all my students watched in horror. An investigation determined it was due to a faulty design flaw with the O-rings that had not provided a proper seal. Barbara Morgan, the back-up teacher, continued her training and became a professional astronaut herself in 1998. She successfully flew on Space Shuttle mission STS-118 to the International Space Station on August 8, 2007 aboard Endeavour, the orbiter that replaced Challenger. I sure am glad she made it.

Christa McAuliffe

David Rhodes