

Teachers Guide

Christa McAuliffe: Reach for the Stars

Directed by Renee Sotile & Mary Jo Godges

Overview

In 1986 space shuttle Challenger exploded, traumatizing the nation and taking the lives of the seven-member NASA crew. Among them was Christa McAuliffe, the first Teacher in Space. Christa McAuliffe: Reach for the Stars is her story. Christa McAuliffe was a courageous woman and passionate teacher whose lifelong commitment to education was so great that she gave her life for it. In this film, for the first time McAuliffe's family speaks out about the impact of her death, revealing the deep private loss behind the public tragedy and how it drastically altered their lives. Previously unseen NASA footage and candid interviews with NASA colleagues reveal McAuliffe's unique spirit and personality. Most remember the event as a great loss, but in fact McAuliffe's life and death have inspired millions around the world. Despite her death, she remains one of America's most vivid and beloved astronauts.

Warning to Educators: Please preview this program as it contains images that some students may find disturbing.

Grade Level: 7 -12, College (modify for grades 4-6)

Subject Areas: U.S. History, Current Events, Science and Technology

Objectives: Christa McAuliffe: Reach for the Stars and its corresponding discussion questions and activities challenge students to:

- Examine the life and legacy of Christa McAuliffe
- Investigate the history of NASA's space shuttle program and reflect on the impact of the Challenger explosion.
- Interpret multiple perspectives on the Challenger explosion and human space flight.
- Explore their own personal and professional goals and develop plans for achieving them.

Discussion Questions

1. Who was Christa McAuliffe? How did those who knew Christa describe her -- as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a teacher, a friend, an employee and an astronaut? Based on what you learned in the program, how would you characterize Christa McAuliffe?

2. Why do you think that President Ronald Reagan selected a teacher to be the first citizen passenger in the history of the U.S. space program? Why did Christa want to go into space? What mission did she hope to accomplish? Based on what you learned in the program, why might Christa have been chosen as the first citizen in space?

3. "I would like to humanize the space age by giving a perspective from a non-astronaut, because I think the students will look at that and say this is an ordinary person," said McAuliffe. What do you think that she meant? Do you think that it is important to "humanize the space age"? Explain. To what extent, if at all, do you support human space exploration and the "Teacher in Space" program? Explain.

4. When was the space shuttle Challenger explosion? According to the experts interviewed in the program, what was the cause of the Challenger explosion? Do you think the fact that there was a teacher on board impacted the public's reaction to the Challenger explosion? State your rationale. How did Christa's family and friends respond to the tragedy? How might you account for the variety of reactions to her death?

5. Following the shuttle tragedy, Christa's husband Steve told the public, "If you sit on the sidelines, reflect back on Christa as hero or as glorious representative or canonized saint rather than putting your entire energies into accomplishing for her what she wanted to do, then I think her efforts would have been in vain." What do you think that he meant by this? Do you think that Christa McAuliffe is a hero? How do you think that Christa McAuliffe should be remembered?

6. Christa McAuliffe's personal message was, "I touch the future. I teach." What does this message mean to you? What do you want your personal message or motto to be?

Activity Suggestions

"I did it. I accomplished it with having absolutely no idea that I was going to get this far. If I can get this far, you can do it too." - Christa McAuliffe

"Reach for it, you know. Go push yourself as far as you can." - Christa McAuliffe

- Ask students, "Why do you think that the title of this program is Reach for the Stars?" Discuss Christa McAuliffe's accomplishments. Then ask, "If you could accomplish anything in your lifetime, what would it be? What contributions do you want to make to your family, your community, your school or society? How and for what do you want to be remembered? Do you plan to reach for the stars? Why or why not?"
- Help students to identify and write down their goals. Explain that while students should reach for the stars when setting goals, they should have a reasonable chance of achieving them. Have students develop personal goals for categories such as: school, career, personal character, health, community, financial, family/friends or leisure activities.
- For each goal, have students list what obstacles or challenges, if any, they would need to overcome. Then, have them develop outlines detailing the steps they would take to surmount the obstacles and reach their goals. Encourage students to identify their personal strengths and unique gifts, and have them consider how they might use these talents to help them realize their dreams.
- After students have developed plans for achieving their goals, have them imagine a time in the future when they have accomplished their goals. Challenge them to create print, online or video stories that document what they accomplished, how they accomplished it, what they had to overcome and the impact that the experience had on their lives and the lives of those around them.

Perceptions of Human Space Flight

Inform students that on April 12, 1981, a new era of human space flight began when the first shuttle mission launched from Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Since then, more than 100 shuttle missions have taken place. Direct students to multimedia resources to learn about the history of NASA's space shuttle program and the educational programs that were developed in the aftermath of the Challenger explosion.

Then, have students interview school, family and community members to gather information about the public's perception of the space shuttle program -- from the first shuttle launch to today. Students may choose to ask questions such as:

- What, if anything, do you remember about the early years of the space shuttle program? What were your opinions of the shuttle program at the time?
- What, if anything, do you remember about the space shuttle Challenger explosion? To what extent, if at all, did the Challenger tragedy alter your perceptions of the space shuttle program?
- What is your opinion of the space shuttle and human flight programs today?
- What is your opinion of the teacher in space program?
- Are you interested in space exploration? Do you think that human space flight is an important and valuable enterprise? Explain.

Have students share and analyze their findings. Then, have students share their own opinions about human space flight and the future of space exploration. Pose the following question for class discussion or a writing prompt: "Based on what you learned from the program and your research, to what extent do you think that Christa McAuliffe's mission has been accomplished?"

Keywords

Christa McAuliffe, NASA, space shuttle Challenger, Barbara Morgan, "O-ring," Challenger Learning Centers

Curriculum Connections

The Standards for the English Language Arts are published by the National Council of Teachers of English (www.readwritethink.org/standards) .

- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

The Curriculum Standards for Social Studies are published by the National Council for Social Studies (www.socialstudies.org/standards).

- Time, Continuity and Change: Students will learn about the ways human beings view themselves in and over time.
- Individual Development and Identity: Students will explore the influences on individual development and identity including culture, groups and institutions.
- Science, Technology and Society: Students will examine the relationships among science, technology and society.

McREL Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education is published online by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (www.mcrel.org/standards).

- Science: Standard 13. Understands the scientific enterprise
- Technology: Standard 3. Understands the relationships among science, technology, society, and the individual