

One Giant Leap for Girl-Kind: Memories of the Space Shuttle Program

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FIRST PERSON | Just the term "space shuttle" evokes images into the dark beyond, travel outward into the universe as simple as catching the 10:05 bus. In 39 years, the space shuttle program, [ending with the final launch of Atlantis scheduled for Friday](#), provided some amazing highs and some devastating lows, as [described in depth by Time Magazine](#).

When I was a little girl, there had never been an American woman in space. At least not until [Dr. Sally Ride](#). I still remember my first glimpses of her: young, intelligent, capable. She was the first American female to leave Earth, on the Challenger in 1983, and again in 1984. Ride, a strong athlete with a Ph.D. in physics, was part of an [effort by NASA to include more scientists in space missions](#). But to young girls, she proved that a girl really could grow up to do anything -- even the sky wasn't the limit.

We watched the initial launches intently, amazed at this quick route to the stars, but over the years they became routine. NASA invented a safe, reliable method of space travel; as with anything incredible, it soon became normal.

The program was so reliable that NASA launched the [Teacher in Space Program](#), announcing that it would allow a civilian aboard the Challenger. NASA went from 11,000 applicants to the single teacher chosen: [Christa McAuliffe](#), another woman.

For girls, it was an amazing time, as women did lot of things then, but hadn't done everything. The first American woman had gone into orbit, and now a woman would be the first American civilian in space. The shuttle program opened doors to the universe while doing the same for girls, and we looked at the program without fear, only with wide hopes for the future.

[Until Jan. 28, 1986.](#)

I was in class when a teacher popped his head in. "The space shuttle blew up," he said, and moved on to the next classroom. We sat, stunned. The next thing I recall is the news on a TV in the classroom. There were the moments we'd come to see as ordinary: the countdown, the rockets firing, the shuttle lifting from the ground.

And then the explosion, leaving trails of white against a bright-blue sky and killing all seven aboard, including Christa McAuliffe.

For me, those early space shuttle days evoke the limitlessness of youth, the belief that anything is possible, tempered with growing up and realizing that even the amazing has a cost.

We never got our quick-ticket to space, and we lost many in the trying. Still, with Friday's final flight, we close a chapter of space exploration that might seem clumsy in a hundred years, but meant the universe to us.