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Spitz: We still have room for heroes

By [Julia Spitz](#)
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A photo of the fractured white plume against the clear sky brings it all back.

The shock. The horror. The disbelief.


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MWDN.com's forum on the Challenger disaster.

 [Challenger Disaster: 20 Years Later](#)

 [S. Christa Corrigan McAuliffe:](#) NASA's official biography.

 [Christa Corrigan McAuliffe Center for Education and Teaching Excellence:](#) Official website of the center, located at Framingham State College.

 [Challenger STS 51-L Accident:](#) NASA website on the Challenger accident

The mix of emotions we felt when we saw Walter Cronkite take off his glasses and deliver the news President Kennedy was dead. An image we wanted to get out of our heads, like the one we'd see on Sept. 11, 2001, but the image wouldn't go away.

On Jan. 28, 1986, the grief was shared across America.

It was shared here, too, but differently.

Framingham was Sharon Christa Corrigan McAuliffe's home.

People here remembered the "teacher in space" from her days at Marian High.

They remembered her laugh, her childhood pranks in grade school. They remembered her playing softball and taking center stage in a Junior League play.

They filled St. Jeremiah's for a memorial service to pay tribute to the girl who worshiped there with her parents, sisters and brothers, and to honor the woman who'd married Steven McAuliffe in the church 16 years earlier.

She's still part of Framingham.

At the Challenger Learning Center at her alma mater, Framingham State College. At the library branch near her family home that now bears her name.

And at the church on Brook Street.

A memorial Mass for Christa and her father, Edward, is planned there this morning at 10:15.

A carillon bells system at the church bears her name now. It was paid for with contributions from people nationwide in memory of Christa's special place in our country's history.

Parishioners hope Christa's bells can help save St. Jeremiah.

It's a church "in vigil," a term few people would have used in 1986, a term now all too familiar to many in the Boston Archdiocese.

St. Jeremiah parishioners started staying in the church round-the-clock last May, one week before Archbishop Sean O'Malley ordered it closed as part of a "reconfiguration."

Since then, they've been able to continue Masses, education and outreach programs while the archdiocese considers the appeal. They've also sought national recognition for the bell system in hopes of bolstering the case for saving the parish. The Vatican last weekend denied their appeal.

From the outside, the church doesn't look much different from when Christa attended.

But like most things around town and across the country, it's not the same as it was in 1986.

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Of course, some things in Framingham never change.

Residents still wring their hands over Rte. 9 sprawl. They still debate whether Framingham should be a city or a town. They still wish there was something they could do about the downtown train tracks.

Just as they did in 1986. (And long before then, too.)

But we have concerns we didn't in 1986.

All it takes is an unattended package at a T station or reports of large quantities of untraceable cell phones being sold in Texas and we know a fear we never imagined 20 years ago.

We also have technology, such as cell phones and laptop computers, that would have seemed like space-age science fiction then.

We communicate with people all over the world through the Internet. We know where we're going thanks to maps linked to satellites out in space.

We still come together as a nation in shock and grief, as we did when we saw what Hurricane Katrina left in her wake at the end of the summer.

And we still have room in our hearts for heroes and hope, the way we did in the moments before the space shuttle Challenger exploded on that January morning.

Now, like then, our heroes don't have to be larger than life.

They can be people like the local residents who opened their homes to Katrina evacuees or volunteered their time for rescue efforts.

They can be the men and women serving our country as a member of the armed forces.

They can be teachers who find a way to unleash a love of learning in a child who couldn't read.






They can be plumbers who pull a car accident victim to safety or police who spend an extra hour with someone in need.

All we ask of our heroes is they be willing to take a risk that could help others.

Those are the kind of people who give us hope when we're facing shock, horror and disbelief.

The way Christa did when she aimed to be the first teacher in space.

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