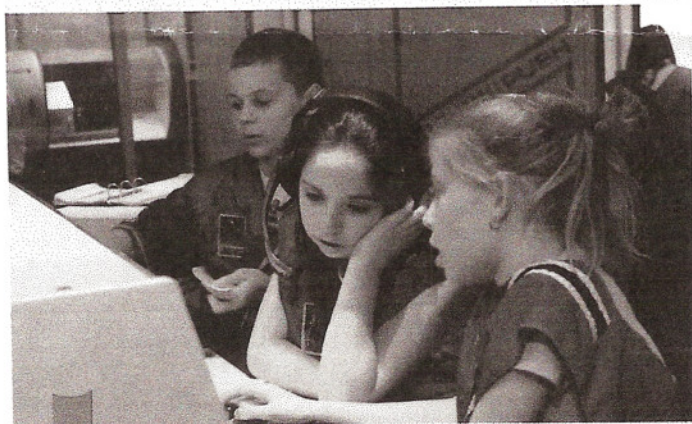


## Continuing the Astronauts' Mission



**STUDENTS AT THE** learning centers must accomplish tasks such as plotting courses, conducting experiments, and building space probes as well as monitoring life-support functions on the space station.

*The Challenger Center for Space Science Education program teaches kids that learning is fun.*

The *Challenger* space shuttle exploded on January 28, 1986, just 73 seconds after launching from Kennedy Space Center on a routine mission into space. The six astronauts and one teacher on board the shuttle died in the blast, which rocked NASA and the entire country to its core.

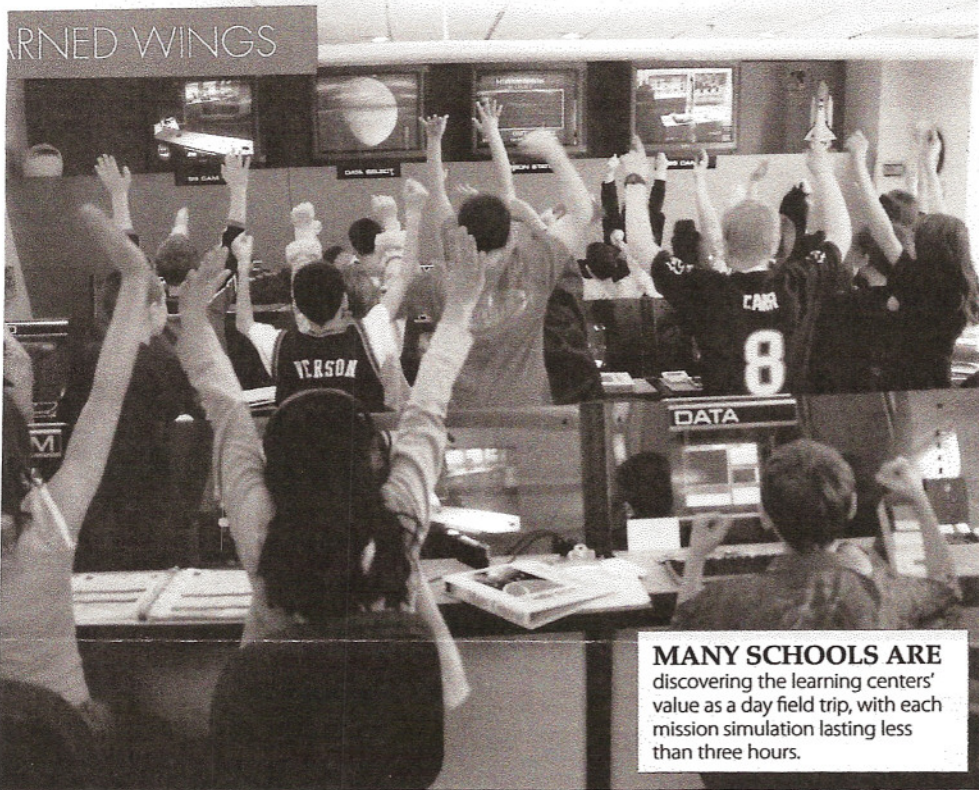
Shortly after the explosion Commander Dick Scobee's widow, June, gathered the grieving families of the astronauts around the coffee table in her living room. In talking about their common grief, the family members realized they shared a common goal: to ensure their loved ones would be remembered, not in stone and marble, but in a living tribute. "The world knew that the seven *Challenger* astronauts died, but they were more than astronauts. They were our families and friends. The world knew how they lived; we wanted the world to know how they lived and for what they were willing to risk their lives. So, you see, we couldn't let them die in vain. Their mission became our mission," June later wrote in *Silver Linings*, her memoir of the *Challenger* accident.

On April 24, 1986, less than three months after the tragic accident, the astronauts' families took a giant step toward fulfilling their common mission by founding and incorporating the Challenger Center for Space Science Education (CCSSE). In January 1987 they shared their vision for the center's program with the people of our nation in their Letter to America. "Since [the loss of the *Challenger* crew], we have been troubled by the incompleteness of their mission," they wrote. "Lessons were left untaught; scientific and engineering problems were left unsolved. Perhaps saddest of all is the idea that America's children must once again put their dreams and their excitement about the future 'on hold.' This is too great a loss, one we cannot accept," they emphasized. "We wish to carry on *Challenger's* mission by creating a network of space learning centers all over the United States . . . We envision places where children, teachers, and citizens alike can touch the future."

Educators, parents, students, government and business leaders, as well as a wide variety of organizations including museums, science centers, and universities in the Unit-

ed States, Canada, and the United Kingdom quickly embraced the idea and joined with the families in fulfilling their mission. The CCSSE, which is headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, now includes a network of 51 learning centers across the United States, in Toronto, Canada, and in Leicester, England, that promote the astronauts' spirit of exploration, quest for knowledge, and inspiration to others to help them achieve their potential. The educators who staff these centers not only teach students but also, perhaps more importantly, show them how to enjoy learning by giving them a practical use for the things they learn in the classroom.

The more than 500,000 students who participate in the learning centers each year learn to look beyond the known and reach for the things that the future holds, a future opened by math and science. At each center the students are divided into two groups for a simulated space station mission. Half of the students operate the mission control portion while the others operate the space station itself. The students learn how each portion works normally and then use that knowledge as well as their own knowledge of math and



**MANY SCHOOLS ARE** discovering the learning centers' value as a day field trip, with each mission simulation lasting less than three hours.

science to solve problems thrown at them. The mission of the *Challenger* astronauts "continues every time a child is touched by a CCSSE program—when that first spark of curiosity is ignited, when exploration and discovery follow, and possibilities literally extend through the universe," June Scobee Rodgers told the President's Commission in 2004.

"The world knew how they died; we wanted the world to know how they lived and for what they were willing to risk their lives. So, you see, we couldn't let them die in vain. Their mission became our mission."

—June Scobee Rodgers

Miles O'Brien, CNN anchor and space correspondent, became involved in the CCSSE program in 2000 while working on a piece for the 14th anniversary of the disaster. Before taping the program Miles recalls sarcastically thinking, "middle-school children and television cameras . . . always a delightful combination." He was pleasantly surprised when he got to the learning center. "So here we are trying to do our story and talk to this kid and he's screaming, 'Get

out of the way! I'm trying to save the space station.' He couldn't have cared less that CNN was there."

A parent himself, Miles knows how difficult it can be to keep children interested in math and science, especially as they grow older, and he believes this program offers hope for the future by challenging traditional teaching methods. Now a self-labeled, unofficial advisor, Miles helps where he can including designing and hosting the DVD used

to solicit donors for the CCSSE. He believes the very students who participate in the programs will become astronauts and walk on the moon, fly space shuttles, and explore the galaxy—and they will credit the beginning of their interest in space to the CCSSE program, a final and lasting tribute to those who died and a realization of the mission they died trying to realize.

June's dream for the program and for the future of space exploration in general remains ambitious. "Two hundred years ago, President Jefferson commissioned Lewis and Clark to map a terrestrial frontier that was—in its time—remote and unknown. One hundred years ago, the Wright Brothers made their historic first flight at Kitty Hawk and took us further into the frontier of knowledge and discovery. Today, we look to the future, to those not yet named who will take their place in a lineage of great American explorers. And I can't help but think of 200 years from today and dream of a teacher standing in front of her students and saying to them, 'Imagine. Imagine you are living back on Earth.'" —Rachel Stafford

For more information or to contribute to the Challenger Center for Space Science Education program, please visit [challenger.org](http://challenger.org) or call 888.683.9740.



**MILES O'BRIEN, CNN** space correspondent and avid pilot advocates children involvement with the Challenger Center for Space Science Education.