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Chapter 1

“I am directing NASA to begin a search in all of our elementary and secondary schools, and to choose as the first citizen passenger in the history of our space program one of America’s finest—a teacher . . . When that shuttle lifts off, all of America will be reminded of the crucial role teachers and educators play in the life of our nation. I can’t think of a better lesson for our children and our country.”

Some said it was nothing more than publicity to gain the support of educators; others said it was just one more thing he would be noted for in the history books. But when President Ronald Reagan made the announcement on

August 27, 1984, the whole country took notice.

Average people have been dreaming about space travel for hundreds of years. When Neil Armstrong stepped off the lunar module named Eagle onto the surface of the moon during the Apollo space mission on July 20, 1969, it became that much more attainable.

Science fiction movies, cartoons, television shows, and books have painted wonderful pictures of space travel. Never had it been more real than at that moment in our history—the moment that the President told the entire country that an average citizen would be chosen to ride along on the next space shuttle flight.

The media went wild; all Americans were talking about it. One hundred fourteen nominees were going to be chosen—two from each state, and others from U.S. territories, overseas schools, and the like—and from them, ten semi-

finalists would be selected. Those ten would undergo medical tests and interviews at the Johnson Space Center. A winner and runner-up would then be chosen.

NASA expected to receive up to 100,000 applications from teachers all across the country, but only about 11,000 submissions were made. Each of the 114 nominees selected underwent a series of interviews, as well as workshops and lectures on space travel. They were given workbooks and videos. They were reminded, maybe for the first time in many years, what it was like to be a student instead of a teacher!

“You will be the 114 most knowledgeable teachers in the country about the space program and how to relate that information to students,” Dr. William Pierce told them in his welcoming statement that June.

And he was right. Some of the teachers involved went back to their home-

towns to do wonderful things. Some spoke to the National Commission on Space in Salt Lake City, Utah. Others designed space workshops for their students.

Physical requirements for the Space Participant Program were fairly simple to meet. It involved good eyesight with or without glasses, general good health including blood pressure, and being able to hear a whispered voice at a distance of three feet.

The week of interviews was like the Miss America competitions, but without the swimsuit portion. It was one long talent contest where the teachers were judged on everything from their sense of humor to their imagination.

The people at NASA were interested in finding a candidate who would interview well with the press and look good on the cover of a magazine. They also hoped that the candidate would make creative suggestions on a way to bring

“space” back to earth and make the experience real to the rest of the world.

Many of the applicants’ ideas were awesome but, in the end, it was the most simple idea that caught their attention: keeping a daily diary.

Every newspaper across the country carried stories about their own local hopefuls. There were two African-Americans who attended the week-long seminar in Washington, D.C.—William M. Dillon, Jr. of San Mateo, California, and Rosa W. Hampston of Christiansted, Virginia. They were featured in a July issue of *Jet*, a magazine devoted to the accomplishments of African-Americans. It was a time when anyone involved with the program could be found on the front page of a newspaper or on the cover of a magazine.

When the time finally came for the ten finalists to be chosen, NASA put together a special panel of people to make the decision. The panel consisted

of celebrities as well as ordinary people. Terri Rosenblatt of the Council of Chief State School Officers was the lucky one to contact the ten finalists.

Those chosen were Michael Metcalf of Vermont, Dave Marquart of Idaho, Richard Methia of Massachusetts, Peggy Lathlaen of Texas, Barbara Morgan of Idaho, Christa McAuliffe of New Hampshire, Kathleen Beres of Maryland, Niki Wenger of West Virginia; Robert Foerster of Indiana, and Judith Garcia of Virginia.

It was the middle of the night when the phone rang at Christa McAuliffe's home in Concord, New Hampshire, and her husband sleepily answered.

"It's for you," he told his wife. "It's someone from NASA. You made the final ten."

"If you're kidding," she told him, "you are in big trouble!"

They were the ten happiest teachers in America that week, and they all