

Catholic school alumna participated in NASA's Teacher in Space program

Kathleen Beres recalls all too well holding her face on the morning of Jan. 28, 1986, as the spaceship Challenger exploded 18 miles up in the cold blue sky. The rocket spat unwanted fireworks above a crowd witnessing the tragedy. The Catholic High School of Baltimore alumna watched from the outdoors VIP area near where the rocket launched 73 seconds earlier.

"People were still cheering," she sadly remembered, "while I knew it was exploding."

Her colleague and fellow teacher Christa McAuliffe was on board and perished with six others. Ms. Beres later maintained a perpetual state of sorrow as she attended all seven funerals.

As astronaut candidates, Ms. McAuliffe and Ms. Beres trained together with eight other teachers selected for NASA's Teachers in Space program in 1984.

"It was such a fun time," said Ms. Beres of the two years the candidates were featured in magazines and newspapers and on national news as they were assigned to several flight centers around the states.

She aimed to communicate "the value of space to students," she said. "The classroom goes beyond its four walls - the universe is our classroom."

In NASA training exercises, the former 15-year veteran public school teacher experienced weightlessness aboard aircrafts and tested in high altitude and hyperbaric chambers, preparing to enter space if chosen.

Since the days of sporting a high school olive green jumper and tan blouse, Ms. Beres' list of accomplishments and adventures is extensive. She's mountain-climbed on every continent in the world, crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a 31-foot sailboat, and

sailboat-raced from Annapolis to Bermuda.

When fellow teachers shared destination information before school ended each summer, Ms. Beres' reply was never Ocean City. Instead, she traveled the globe to Greenland, Kenya, the Antarctica, Russia, New Zealand and Central America. Field research work shuffled her to places like Iceland, Patagonia, the Galapagos Islands and Fiji. She has kayaked icy waters accompanied by whales and icebergs.

"I am adventurous," she said with a bright smile, often using her hands excitedly to speak. "As a kid, the swings didn't go high enough and the slides didn't go fast enough. I love nature and the beauty of the world."

At the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center Visitor Center in Greenbelt, where Ms. Beres chatted with The Catholic Review, an enormous tent was being erected outside for a 25th anniversary reception that night to honor Dr. Sally K. Ride, the first American female in space in 1983. The event was to recognize the contributions of women to space, science and engineering.

Ms. Beres was a scheduled speaker to a group of 35 young female students on the joys and successes of nontraditional careers for women.

Catholic school was a constant throughout her life, first at St. Clement Mary Hofbauer, Rosedale, near the neighborhood where she grew up, then after high school to College of Notre Dame of Maryland. She then earned a master's degree in science from The Johns Hopkins University.

Ms. Beres recalled her acceptance into the space program in 1984 after submitting a 25-page application which took several months to complete. Selected as a finalist from more than 11,000 other teachers across the nation, the Catholic school alumna traveled to Washington, D.C., and Houston for medical tests, briefings and interviews.

Her Catholic education was one for life.

"It prepares you," she said. "It teaches self-reliance, responsibility for one's actions, respect and judgment. You get a sense of what's important and what isn't. It's value-centered, coupled with an understanding of faith."

Retired from the aerospace industry as of the spring, Ms. Beres is now an aerospace consultant for companies who bid to build spacecraft. She works from her home in Mitchellville and stays involved with Catholic High as a speaker, sometimes during commencements.

Recently she narrated a WBAL radio public service announcement for the school.

Monthly now, she meets with former classmates after becoming involved in a reunion two years ago.

In her speeches, she offers words of encouragement for girls to enter careers in science and math.

Wanting to fly in space is risky, yes, but something the blond-haired Ms. Beres has desired since she was a child.

“Every day we live is risk management,” she said, “so we learn from failures and celebrate successes. Catholic High had an enormous impact on my life and helped make me the woman that I’ve become.”