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'Lift-off' is tribute to 7 here

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On Jan. 28, 1986, enthusiastic students at the Kino Learning Center were launching the school's mock space shuttle when disaster struck the real one.

Just 73 seconds into its launch, the space shuttle Challenger exploded, killing seven astronauts, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe.

Shocked but undeterred, students at the North Side private school carried out their planned "flight" that day.

On the first anniversary of the explosion, the school held a memorial "lift-off" today of the mock space shuttle. Two special guest "astronauts" attended — students

ASTRONAUTS, continued/12A



GARY GAYNOR/Tucson Citizen

Hillary Holloway (top) and Melissa Blackey (right) of New Hampshire joined Tucson student Scott Clark at the shuttle mock-up.

from the Concord, N.H., school where McAuliffe taught.

Melissa Blackey and Hillary Holloway are 17-year-old seniors at Concord High School. They were chosen to represent their school and accepted Kino's invitation to participate in the mock shuttle flight and memorial service.

Without the teacher from Concord, N.H., aboard, few would have paid attention to the preparations for Flight 51-L. Without her there was nothing to distinguish this mission from the 24 that preceded it. No derring-do was planned, no spacewalks, no satellite rescues, no fancy rehearsals erecting 100-foot solar panels. Challenger was to deliver a satellite to space. Ho hum. The three commercial television networks did not consider the launch newsworthy enough to cut into their morning programming.

"People really pulled together after the tragedy . . . our whole school became really close," Holloway said. "It seems strange that we'll be in the shuttle while memorials are going on all over."

Agreeing with her friend, Blackey said, "I think Ms. McAuliffe would have wanted us to do something like this because it educates people about the space shuttle."

The plywood mockup of the shuttle's midsection was built at the school a year ago. It is about 7 feet high, 10 feet wide and 12 feet long. Both girls said they were impressed it.

"We were told not to expect very much, but the shuttle is really very elaborate, much more elaborate than I expected," Melissa said.

The "trip" itself will stress realism.

A seven-student crew will spend tonight in the shuttle. And crew members will perform six experiments that McAuliffe would have broadcast from the shuttle to her students via satellite. All the experiments will be videotaped, and the student astronauts will explain how they think the experiments would have turned out without gravity.

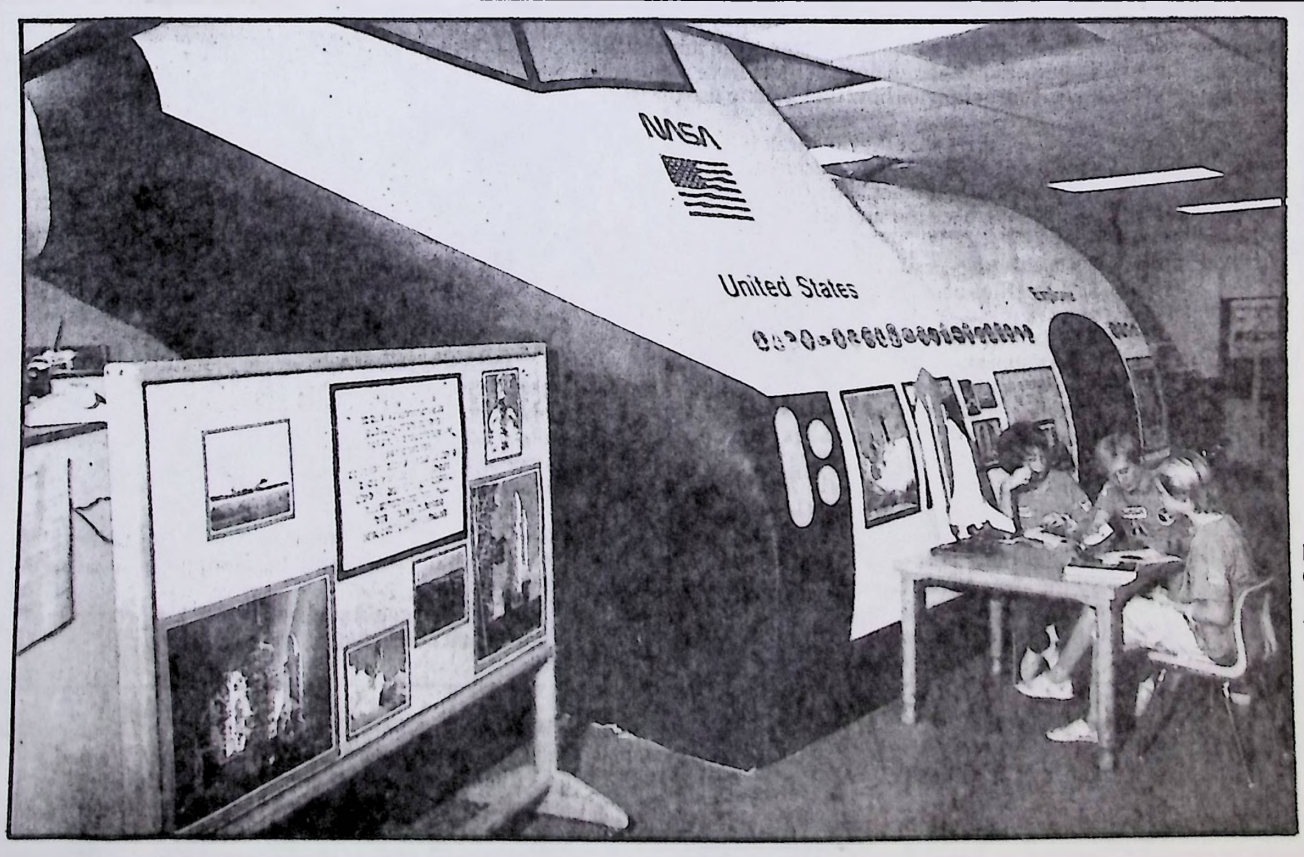
After last year's tragedy, Kino student Scott Clark, 13, almost changed his mind about wanting to be a real astronaut. Clark had been appointed commander of last year's mock mission.

Clark, who also commanded the memorial mock shuttle flight, since has reaffirmed to himself that he wants to go into space.

"I was afraid, but I realized that you can't accomplish a goal as great as space without risks," he said.

Students continued using the shuttle model throughout the last year, said Sister Judy Bisignano, director of the school at 6625 N. First Ave.

Another Kino student, 17-year-old Julie Fox, said schools should never stop teaching about the shuttle because "it may be a major form of transportation for people in the future, and our kids will need to know about it."



REMEMBERING CHALLENGER — Students at Kino Learning Center (left) this week prepared for a memorial "liftoff" of the space shuttle Challenger, marking the first anniversary of the spacecraft's explosion. Preparing for the "mission" aboard the detailed mockup of the shuttle were (from left) Ashley Duncan, Scott Clark and Ryanne VanNostrand.