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Oklahoma State University-Stillwater, Oklahoma

Spacemobile and Challenger by Tom Sarko. Written 2001.

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by Tom Sarko

I was a "Spacemobiler" from the summer of 1985 through the summer of 1987, so my tenure is inextricably linked with the Challenger disaster. There are two aspects to this that are foremost in my mind.

First, the day of the accident is forever etched in my memory. I was waiting to catch a flight from Palm Beach International to New Orleans, where I would pick up my van and drive to a teacher workshop starting in Mobile, Alabama that night. The flight was delayed, so I walked outside the terminal to view the launch, some 170 miles away but easily seen on that clear, crisp day. Something was different about the trail of smoke from the SRB's: instead of flattening out the way it usually did, it formed an arch in the sky. At first, I attributed this to the exceptional visibility, thinking I was merely seeing the launch differently, i.e., better than I had before from West Palm Beach. However, as the other passengers and I walked out on the tarmac to board our flight, a gentleman told me that he had been watching the launch on an airport TV, and that the Challenger had exploded. I didn't question him, but I didn't fully believe it either. As I landed in Orlando and took off again on a connecting flight, the booster smoke trails still hung in that calm, cold air, much like the thoughts and questions in my mind. There was no discussion of the accident during my flight, no announcement from the pilot. When I arrived in New Orleans, my worst fears were confirmed: the unthinkable had happened; what I had naively thought was virtually impossible had happened. Everyone, it seemed, was crowded around the airport TV monitors watching the Challenger's destruction and the loss of her crew replayed over and over again.

The other aspect of this event that comes to mind is surprisingly positive. All of our programs were postponed or cancelled for a period of time (I remember it as being about two weeks) as we learned more about the accident and regrouped, so to speak. When we went back out in the field, I was surprised to find that almost everyone I spoke to, students, teachers, and the general public alike, was still very supportive of space exploration in general and of NASA in particular. Yes, people were curious and wanted to know what caused the accident and how such a disaster could be averted in the future, but they were also in nearly unanimous agreement that we should fix the problems and press on. I was very encouraged by that response. It made my job so much easier than it might have been during what was, arguably, NASA's darkest hour.

During my brief two years with the AESP, there was a definite deemphasis of school assembly programs in favor of teacher workshops and in-service training. This was a logical move considering the resulting "multiplier effect" of more teachers AND students actually being reached by our services in this manner. However, I must admit that my fondest Spacemobile memories are from the contact time I had with students. I was also on hand to witness the beginnings of the explosion of educational technology that continues today. Still, in my mind, if the AESP is distilled to its purest essence, it is just this: a tool or set of tools (very good tools and perhaps the best available) with which teachers can better motivate students to pursue science and mathematics courses and even careers.