

## Reflections of the Class of 1986

By Jill Colford Schoeniger

Every generation has that moment. Where were you when...? For our parents' generation, it was, "Where were you when you heard President Kennedy had been shot?" For those of us who graduated from F&M in 1986, our significant moment occurred in the second semester of our senior year, a time for us that was full of great anticipation and hope, tinged with anxiety.

Anticipation. Hope. Anxiety. Those three words are also synonymous with space-shuttle launches. All those emotions were on display the morning of January 28, 1986, when the Space Shuttle Challenger prepared for liftoff. For our generation, astronauts were heroes, the space program a source of great national pride and space travel still a cause for wonder.

The media coverage of the Challenger mission was extensive. Millions of Americans tuned in live to watch, including many classrooms, because one of the crew members was Christa McAuliffe, the first member of the Teacher in Space Project. This spirited school teacher with the infectious smile became a media darling. Here was a normal citizen – someone who could be your next-door neighbor -- and she was going into space. We were transfixed and inspired.

The country was full of anticipation, hope and anxiety when the shuttle lifted off at 11:38. But a mere 73 seconds later hope turned to anxiety. Then to disbelief. Then to sadness. The shuttle, we quickly learned, had broken apart, and all seven crew members had died.

The nation was in shock, as were we on campus. The news spread quickly. "Did you hear?" we asked one another solemnly in line at the Common Ground or sitting in the Atrium or on our way to class in Stahr. Those students not watching live – and many were -- flocked to TV sets in their rooms and common areas to participate in this shared national moment of shock and sadness.

During the hours and days that followed, we watched the footage over and over again. We cried. We prayed. We saw the pre-launch footage of the joyous astronauts bounding around, full of anticipation and hope. We knew as college seniors, we were being launched into a new world in a matter of months. Our anticipation and hope were now tinged with more than a little anxiety.

"We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and slipped the surly bonds of Earth to touch the face of God," said President Ronald Reagan to a grieving nation that night from the Oval Office. We, the Class of 1986, have never forgotten them and what they meant to us.