

30TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHALLENGER TRAGEDY: St. Mary's teacher wins prestigious award in memory of crew

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ALTON - Jessica Foersterling, a fifth-grade teacher at St. Mary's School in Alton, was inspired to be a teacher after she watched the Challenger tragedy on Jan. 28, 1986.

Challenger was launched at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida on that date and the flight lasted 73 seconds before a rubber seal in one of the shuttle's twin booster rockets failed, triggering an explosion.

All seven members of the Challenger crew died in the accident. Those aboard represented a cross-section of America in terms of race, gender, geography, background and religion and included a teacher Sharon Christa McAuliffe. She was the first teacher to fly in space.

Sitting in her classroom the day that happened was young Jessica Foersterling, first thinking it was going to be a joyous occasion, then it turned into tragedy. She had nothing but admiration for Sharon Christa McAuliffe and because of her inspiration, said she became a teacher.

"I remember how brave it was for a teacher to go up in space and the tragedy happened," she said. "It did make me want to be a teacher in her honor.

Foersterling recently found out she has been selected as one of Challenger Learning Centers *"Inspiring Teachers."*

Foersterling was nominated by a fellow teacher as someone who inspires her students,



boys

and girls alike, to pursue a lifelong engagement in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). The St. Mary's teacher she was humbled that a colleague would nominate her for what she terms a wonderful award.

Today, which marks the 30th anniversary of the loss of the space shuttle Challenger and its crew, a ceremony at the Challenger Learning Center in St. Louis, hosted by Boeing, will honor Jessica, along with other local teachers who have continued the Challenger legacy of inspiring students.

Foersterling is in her 16th year as a St. Mary's teacher.

"It is a great environment with great families, kids and faculty who all support each other," she said of St. Mary's. "It is easy to teach here because of those things. It is a great environment, great families, kids and faculty and all support each other."

The St. Mary's teacher said she tries to challenge her kids and make learning fun using a variety of things to keep them interested, and coming back for more.

"We just started STEM activities with our fifth-grade class," she said. "These activities incorporate math, science, technology and engineering for the kids. Some you think wouldn't get that much from it, get the most. I even had a child ask for some a STEM activities kit for Christmas."

St. Mary's fifth-grade students have spent the last three years traveling to the Challenger Center in St. Louis to take a simulated trip into outer space. Before their visit, the students study the various roles of the astronauts, which include STEM activities and all are given a specific role to play on the shuttle.

The administrators at St. Mary's say Jessica is an exceptional teacher, and immerses her students in engaging activities such as this throughout the year.

"She is never content to just kick back and teach from the book, Jessica brings creativity and excitement to her classroom in many ways," said the administrators.

Another example of her "outside the box" activities takes place during the Iditarod dog race in Alaska. Jessica teaches her students about this grueling race and each student chooses a musher and follows him or her throughout the event. During this time, she often brings in Gene Holt, a local man who has competed in the Iditarod. Gene puts on an assembly for all the elementary students. He explains the sport, the race, and shows his dogs and sled. Gene keeps Siberian Huskies, which he still mushes for fun, pulling a wheeled sled.

These types of learning activities help explain why Jessica is so loved by her students and their parents and deserving of the Challenger Learning Center honor, St. Mary's officials said.

