



Ride, Sally (1951-2012)

by Linda Rapp

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Sally Ride.

Sally Ride made history as the first American woman in space when she flew as a mission specialist aboard the space shuttle Challenger in 1983. After retiring from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), she devoted herself to education, both as a university professor and the founder of Sally Ride Science, an enterprise that encourages girls to study mathematics, science, and engineering and to pursue careers in those fields.

Ride did not come out publicly during her lifetime. Her lesbianism did not become generally known until July 2012 when the announcement of her death acknowledged her longtime partner. The revelation prompted a wide-ranging discussion about the closet and the obligation of famous glbtq people to come out.

The elder of the two daughters of Dale Ride, a professor of political science at Santa Monica College, and Joyce Ride, who was a volunteer counselor at a women's correctional institution, Sally Kristen Ride was born on May 26, 1951 in Encino, California, and grew up there. The family belonged to the Presbyterian church. Both Professor and Mrs. Ride served as elders, and Ride's sister, Karen, became an ordained minister.

Of their family life, Dale Ride told Jerry Adler of *Newsweek*, "We mostly just let [our daughters] grow up normally. We might have encouraged, but mostly we let them explore."

One of the things that Sally Ride would explore was tennis, at which she excelled at a young age, becoming a nationally ranked amateur while still in her teens. Her proficiency in the sport won her a scholarship to the private Westlake School for Girls in Los Angeles.

Journalist Susan Okie, a schoolmate and fellow scholarship student who would become Ride's lifelong friend, said that the two of them "felt out of place among actors' daughters and 'Bel Air belles' at the school," but Ride would find a key to her future at Westlake. "I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself," she told Del Jones of *USA Today*. "That environment gave me the confidence and motivation to declare a physics major in college."

Essential to her commitment to science was the mentorship of Elizabeth Mommaerts, who had been a professor at UCLA before coming to teach physiology at Westlake. Ride described her as "logic personified," and she was impressed by her dedication to the scientific method.

Ride remained in contact with her former teacher, and she was greatly distressed when Mommaerts committed suicide in 1972. Mommaerts would always be a hero to Ride, who told more than one journalist that upon being selected as an astronaut, the person with whom she most wanted to share the news was Mommaerts.

The other person Ride cited, in an interview with Roger Brooks of *Success* magazine, as instrumental in her

choice of a career in science was her father. "He valued education, and he was remarkable in that he believed whatever I was interested in, he should encourage," she stated. "He spoke with my teachers to make sure they knew I was interested in science"--setting an example of fostering science education for girls that Ride herself would eventually follow.

After graduating from Westlake in 1968, Ride enrolled at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where she studied for three semesters before returning to California, where she took physics courses at UCLA while continuing to develop her tennis skills with an eye to a potential career as an athlete.

Ride transferred to Stanford University in 1970. She joined the tennis team, quickly becoming its top singles player and achieving a high national amateur ranking. While teaching at a summer tennis camp, she attracted the notice of Billie Jean King, who encouraged her to give up her studies and become a professional tennis player.

Ride chose to remain in college, but her ultimate career was still unclear. She had delighted in discovering the works of Shakespeare, and so she double-majored in English and physics, graduating in 1973.

Ride considered pursuing her study of literature but opted instead for science. Accepted to the graduate program in physics at Stanford, she earned her master's degree in 1975 and a doctorate in astrophysics in 1978.

In 1977 Ride noticed an ad in the Stanford student newspaper announcing that NASA was seeking applications from scientists--including women--to become astronauts. "She knew instantly that this was what she wanted to do," wrote Okie in the *Washington Post*.

Competition for the posts was intense, as some 8,000 people applied. Ride made the cut to be among the 208 finalists and, after intense scrutiny--including medical exams, evaluation by psychiatrists, and an interview with the NASA selection committee--earned one of the 35 slots. Five other women were also chosen.

Some of the members of the previously exclusively male community of astronauts did not initially welcome the inclusion of women. Sara Sanborn of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* reported that Apollo astronaut Alan Bean, one of the self-declared skeptics, revised his thinking after participating in the training of the new class of astronauts. "Females intuitively understand astronaut skills," he stated. "They perform the mental and physical skills as well as men do."

Notwithstanding the affirmation in the second part of Bean's comment, the dismissive allusion to "intuition" as key to women's success underscored the obstacles faced by female astronauts. However, Ride, armed with knowledge and skill in addition to whatever intuition she might possess, was up to the challenge.

She became a member of the space shuttle program, working first--for two years--on the design and development of a remote manipulator arm for the vehicle for its first mission.

On the second and third missions Ride was named "capcom"--short for "capsule communicator," the person responsible for giving the instructions of the flight director to the astronauts. Being "capcom" was often a stepping stone to selection to a crew, and so it was with Ride, who was named a mission specialist on the flight of Challenger scheduled for 1983.

In the meanwhile, Ride had married fellow astronaut Steven Hawley in 1982 in a ceremony attended only by their immediate families. She chose Levi's and a rugby shirt as her bridal attire.

The couple would divorce in 1987.

Although Ride had stated to Sharon Begley of *Newsweek*, "I didn't become an astronaut to become a historic figure or a symbol of progress for women," she did, in fact, make history as the first American woman in space when she blasted off on the Challenger on June 18, 1983 to the cheers of a crowd that included feminist activists Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda and that was estimated to number some quarter million people in all.

Many of those on hand for the launch sported T-shirts or carried signs reading "Ride, Sally Ride."

In her role as a mission specialist, Ride participated in tasks including the use of the remote manipulator arm and launching satellites, as well as operating various systems on the spacecraft.

Although Ride valued her privacy, she immediately became a very public face of NASA and an ambassador for the space program, making appearances and speeches and giving numerous interviews. Escaping attention was impossible, wrote Okie: "She couldn't go to the grocery store without being asked for an autograph. She told me that the only time she felt she could be alone was when she was standing at a lectern, preparing to deliver a speech."

Ride made her second flight as a mission specialist aboard the Challenger in October 1984. The following year she was named to a third crew and was in training for the mission when the explosion of the Challenger on January 28, 1986 caused NASA to suspend flights, pending an investigation.

Ride was appointed to the Presidential Commission that conducted the inquiry into the disaster. As a member of the panel, Ride did not hesitate to ask tough questions, and, reported Denise Grady of the *New York Times*, she declared that "it was difficult not to be angered by the findings" that potential problems had not been taken as seriously as they should have been.

Primary among those was the susceptibility of the seals on the rocket boosters (called O-rings) to fail when the weather was cold, as was the case when the Challenger was launched.

An engineer named Roger Boisjoly testified that he had warned those in charge about the hazards of the O-rings. Others in the program distanced themselves from him for this breaking of ranks, but Ride, alone among the panelists, gave strong support, even hugging him after he testified. Boisjoly was touched by the expression of her confidence in him.

After her service on the commission, Ride was appointed Special Assistant to the Administrator at NASA Headquarters, in which capacity she headed a study team on strategic planning for the space program. Their report, issued in 1987, recommended exploration of Mars as an "ultimate objective" for NASA but suggested further study of the moon and the possible establishment of a lunar scientific base in the nearer term.

Shortly thereafter, Ride retired from NASA for posts in academia, first as a science fellow at the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stanford and then, in 1989, as a professor at the University of California, San Diego, and as director of its California Space Institute.

Deeply committed to encouraging young girls to develop and maintain an interest in science and mathematics, Ride founded the company Sally Ride Science in 2001. Initiatives include science camps and festivals and teacher-training programs, as well as the publication of books about science and careers in the field.

Ride felt that it is extremely important to reach out to teachers to ensure that they do not "succumb to the stereotype that science wasn't for girls" and that they help young girls fight "lingering stereotypes [and] societal pressure . . . to dumb down in middle school." She also wanted to help teachers develop curricula that both engaged youngsters' interest and made them eager to learn more and also provided information about potential careers.

Ride co-authored three books about space and two on climate change with Tam O'Shaughnessy, the Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President of Sally Ride Science. (Ride had co-authored her first book for young people, *To Space and Back*, with Okie in 1986.) O'Shaughnessy holds bachelor's and master's degrees in biology and a doctorate in school psychology. She has taught both subjects in college and is a professor emerita at San Diego State University.

In 2003 Ride was chosen to be on the panel investigating a second space shuttle disaster, the destruction of Columbia as it re-entered the earth's atmosphere. In that case, a piece of insulation had become detached from a fuel tank and damaged a wing of the craft.

Although the physical problem was different from the one that occurred on the Challenger, Ride told Claudia Dreifus of the *New York Times* that she saw "parallels . . . not so much between the accidents themselves, but between some of the organizational contributing causes to the accidents." She felt that planners had let their guard down with respect to potential dangers. She stressed the need for "a stronger safety organization, with members present at all the right meetings."

After a long illness, Ride died of pancreatic cancer on July 23, 2012. Only with the announcement of her death did it become publicly known that O'Shaughnessy was not just her professional associate but also her life partner of 27 years.

After Ride's death, her sister, the Reverend Karen ("Bear") Ride, who is also a lesbian, in an appearance on the Current TV program *The Young Turks with Cenk Uygur*, revealed that Sally Ride and O'Shaughnessy had registered a California domestic partnership.

"They were in something of a privileged position. . . . They had the resources to hire attorneys and do all the stuff that one would not normally have to do if one was heterosexually married," she noted. She went on to take to task conservative politicians like Mitt Romney who had issued statements of praise about her sister but who oppose marriage equality. "That's just something that the politicians really need to meditate on. They can't have it both ways."

Other commentators noted that O'Shaughnessy, thanks to the Defense of Marriage Act, is unable to claim the pension and other benefits that legally-recognized surviving spouses of astronauts usually receive.

The posthumous outing of Ride raised other questions. For example, did Ride, a genuine heroine, have an obligation to come out? Would her being out have advanced the cause of glbtq rights? Was she closeted because she feared that she would not have been selected as an astronaut or, later, that her work with children would suffer were she out? Could it be that Ride, having surmounted the obstacles she faced as a woman in science, felt that confronting another obstacle would be too demanding and exhausting?

Andrew Sullivan called her an "absentee heroine" and the Human Rights Campaign issued a statement headlined, "Former Astronaut Sally Ride Chose Privacy over Gay Causes," while Amy Davidson wondered whether she feared that parents would refuse to buy the science books for children that she and O'Shaughnessy co-authored if they knew they were written by lesbians.

Davidson, having done the math that revealed that the O'Shaughnessy-Ride relationship began while Ride was still married to Hawley, even questioned the authenticity of her heterosexual marriage. She wondered, for example, whether Ride (and NASA) thought it necessary for the first woman astronaut in space be

married to a man. Was Hawley, wittingly or not, Ride's "beard"?

These questions raised by Ride's failure to come out publicly during her lifetime are important ones and may be answered in a definitive biography of the astronaut. However, it is well to remember that they also say as much about the homophobic culture in which Ride came of age and achieved her great feat as they do about Ride herself.

Similarly, it is important to emphasize that although Ride was not publicly open about her lesbianism or her relationship with O'Shaughnessy, the two women were not closeted. They were known and accepted as a couple by their large circle of friends and family.

Their long love affair is inspiring. They met when they were twelve years old and played tennis together. They became life partners in 1985, two years after Ride's historic flight. Sharing a passion for science and for education, they stayed together in good times and bad times, including through Ride's terminal illness. In short, they were married in every way except the name.

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