

DR. SALLY K. RIDE

Lesbian Physicist, Astronaut, and Activist (1951-2012)



“When I was a girl, I had a teacher who encouraged my interest in science. She challenged me to be curious, to ask questions, and to think about things for myself.”

– Sally Ride



Sally Ride was born on May 26, 1951, in Los Angeles, CA. She grew up playing sports and competing in national junior tennis tournaments. But it was her fascination with science that led her to become a physicist, a science writer, and an inspirational advocate for science literacy. In 1977, while finishing her Ph.D. in physics at Stanford University, she saw an ad in the student newspaper that NASA was looking for astronauts and, for the first time, was allowing women to apply. She was one of only 35 people – including six women – chosen to join the astronaut corps from among 8,000 applicants. When *Challenger* mission STS-7 blasted off from Kennedy Space Center in Florida, on June 18, 1983, Sally Ride soared into history as the first American woman in space. Her second flight, STS-41G, also aboard *Challenger*, launched on October 5, 1984. Ride was the only person to serve on the presidential commissions investigating both the *Challenger* explosion in 1986 and the *Columbia* disaster in 2003. She retired from NASA in 1987 and became a science fellow at the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stanford. In 1989 she joined the faculty at the University of California, San Diego as a professor of physics and as director of the California Space Institute. In 2001 Ride founded her own company – Sally Ride Science – to pursue her longtime passion for motivating girls and boys to study science and explore careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Sally Ride died on July 23, 2012, after a 17-month battle with pancreatic cancer. She is survived by Dr. Tam O’Shaughnessy, her life partner of 27 years; her mother, Joyce; sister, Bear, and Bear’s spouse, Susan; niece, Caitlin, and nephew, Whitney. In 2013 she was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our nation’s highest civilian honor, by President Barack Obama – a fitting tribute to a remarkable life that became a symbol of the ability of women to break barriers.

Lesson Plan

LEVEL 1: CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH

1. **Activate Prior Experience:** Before today what did you know about the American Astronaut Sally Ride?
2. Read the biographical information on the plaque text (above). Learn more about Dr. Ride here: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sally_Ride
3. View the videos at the following links: <http://www.biography.com/people/sally-ride-9458284> and <https://sallyridescience.com/>. As you watch, take notes about her numerous contributions.
4. **Group Discussion:** Divide into two teams and debate whether Dr. Ride should be most remembered for: A) Being the first American woman in space; or B) Her commitment to getting children to take an interest in studying science.
5. **Extend Knowledge:** Use the following link to learn more about Dr. Ride’s career while at NASA: <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/ride-sk.html>. After the January 28, 1986 Challenger accident why was Dr. Ride asked to serve on the presidential commission?

LEVEL 2: ADDITIVE APPROACH

1. From the New York Times obituary link below http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/24/science/space/sally-ride-trailblazing-astronaut-dies-at-61.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 find examples of media questions asked of Dr. Ride. Do you think other Challenger astronauts were asked similar questions? What was Dr. Ride’s response? What did you learn about her personal life that has not been readily stated in most of the previous things you have read?
2. After her career at NASA, Dr. Sally Ride accomplished much in the field of science education. What did she go on to do?
3. Using the following link, choose one of Sally Ride’s quotes that appeals to you and explain why this particular quote is important: http://www.searchquotes.com/quotes/author/Sally_Ride/

LEVEL 3: TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

1. Make a list of the Presidential Committees, Council Boards, and Fellowships Dr. Ride was named to because of her work at NASA and in science education. Why would Dr. Ride want to spend her time doing each of these things?
2. The all-male NASA astronaut team which resisted the inclusion of woman. Did Dr. Ride use this experience to help other women? How? What would you have done?
3. Sally Ride received various honors for her work and contributions in many fields including the NASA Space Flight Medal and the NCAA’s Theodore Roosevelt Award; she was also inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame and the Astronaut Hall of Fame. How do you think she felt about receiving these honors? What do these awards mean to you?

LEVEL 4: SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH

1. By becoming the first American woman to fly in space, Dr. Ride took a giant step for women. If that had not happened, would a woman astronaut still be a media sensation today? Why or why not?
2. Dr. Ride had been married to fellow astronaut Steven Hawley from 1982 to 1987 until their divorce. According to her obituary, she is survived by her partner of 27 years, Dr. Tam O’Shaughnessy. Do you think that this personal information is relative to Dr. Ride’s work in space and education? Does it matter to you that she was a lesbian?
3. Do you think the NASA astronaut “team” is ready for an LGBT astronaut, man or woman, today? Is the American public ready? Why or why not? Does it/should it make a difference?
4. Dr. Sally Ride is noted on the Legacy Walk bronze memorial as an activist, primarily for her education advocacy. Does it matter to you that she was not a public (open) LGBT figure in her lifetime? Why or why not?