



The University of Texas at Arlington

Division of Student Success

McNair Scholars Program

BIOGRAPHY OF DR. RONALD E. MCNAIR

"Whether or not you reach your goals in life depends entirely on how well you prepare for them and how badly you want them. . . .You're eagles! Stretch your wings and fly to the sky."

— Ronald E. McNair

RONALD E. MCNAIR (1950-1986) — A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Ronald Erwin McNair was born October 21, 1950, in the small community of Lake City, South Carolina. He was a studious child who began school at the age of four and at the age of nine successfully challenged the "whites-only" borrowing privileges at the local library. Ronald's mother (a teacher) and father encouraged him and his brother, Carl, to set high academic standards.



Ronald McNair attended Carver High School where he played football and basketball, ran track and excelled at baseball. He also loved music and played both clarinet and saxophone. Valedictorian of his senior class, McNair applied to North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, where his brother was also admitted. Initially intending to major in music, Ronald changed to physics after a counselor encouraged him to pursue a career in science. While a junior he was able to participate in a year-long exchange program with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). After graduating magna cum laude from North Carolina A & T in 1971, he began his graduate studies at MIT on a Ford Foundation Fellowship.

In 1976 Ronald McNair not only earned his Ph.D. in physics from MIT but also married Cheryl Moore, whom he had earlier met at a church potluck supper. He then accepted a position with Hughes Research Laboratories in Malibu, California, a site for advanced laser research. While at Hughes, McNair decided to apply to the space program after receiving a recruiting brochure from NASA. In 1978 he learned that he was one of thirty-five individuals accepted for training as a mission specialist (astronaut).

In 1984 McNair served as a crewmember aboard the space shuttle *Challenger*, where he was responsible for operation of the remote manipulator arm. Two years later he was one of seven members selected for the second *Challenger* flight, scheduled for January 28, 1986. One goal of this mission was to release a satellite to photograph Halley's Comet. Shortly into the flight, one minute and 13 seconds after take-off, the *Challenger* disappeared amid flames and dense smoke. The flight had gone terribly wrong, and the shuttle plummeted into the Atlantic Ocean. None of the seven crew members survived this tragic event in U.S. space history.



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Dr. Ronald E. McNair lived a relatively brief, but active and meaningful life. He excelled as a student, a physicist, and an astronaut. He found satisfaction in his numerous interests and experienced the joys of family life with his wife and two children. Although only thirty-five at his death, he had already received considerable recognition, including various fellowships, several honorary doctorates, and numerous awards. His quest for excellence inspired the ambitious goals of the program created shortly after his death and that continues to honor his memory: the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program.