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KIDS TALK ABOUT LOSS OF COLUMBIA

By BILL BASKERVILL, Associated Press Writer

RICHMOND, Va. -- Tria Coles says she no longer wants to be an astronaut after watching the Columbia fireball streak across the television screen.

"I was thinking I hoped they had a parachute with it," the 11-year-old said.

Her friend, Octavia Johnson, also 11, advised Tria she could stay on Earth and still work in the space field.

They and other pupils at Clark Springs Elementary School were abuzz Monday about the weekend loss of the space shuttle.

School counselor Margaret Howlette spent the day in classrooms talking with children, telling them that the dream of the seven astronauts was to fly in space. "They would have had it no other way," she said.

Ten-year-old Gregory Day asked Howlette: "Do you know what caused this to come down?" Howlette gently explained there were several theories but no final answer.

Gregory said the Columbia disaster "was just amazing. They were almost at home and all of a sudden there was a big explosion."

Said 11-year-old Kahriah Ford: "It made me feel kind of sad because if there is a big explosion like that, we are going to lose a lot of people."

Coincidentally, students at the school had put up a display Friday called "A Tribute to Ron McNair," one of the astronauts killed in the Challenger explosion in 1986. It contains models and photographs of the space shuttle with a photo of McNair as the centerpiece. There also is a photo of the Columbia astronauts.

Howlette said Clark Springs children had been preparing Valentines for American military personnel shipping out for a possible war with Iraq. Now, she said, they will start making Valentines for relatives of the Columbia astronauts.

"I hope God blesses everybody," said 10-year-old Charlesha Washington.

Gov. Mark R. Warner visited Clark Springs on Monday to announce that it and other schools across the state would be receiving \$1.5 million in computers from the Beaumont Foundation of America, which provides wireless, Internet-enabled computers and software to American schools and communities.

Warner took the opportunity to tell students that the loss of the space shuttle "was very sad."

"The men and women on that space shuttle were very brave," he said. "What they were trying to do is to continue to learn more about our world and our universe."

Warner said later that he has sat down with his own children, ages 8, 11, and 13, three times in the past 18 months to talk about frightful events--the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, the sniper shootings in October and now the loss of the space shuttle.

"I think they understood it was an accident," Warner said of the shuttle loss. "They understood the astronauts knew it was dangerous."

His youngest, however, "needed to be reassured we would still be safe flying in an airplane."

At Yorktown High School in Arlington, where astronaut David Brown graduated in 1974, principal Raymond Pasi led students in a moment of silence Monday morning.

Pasi said students and staff have a special connection to Brown.

"Our sympathy and prayers go out to his family. At the same time, our sadness is mixed with pride that such an extraordinary and outstanding individual went to our school," he said.

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