AN APPRECIATION

PATTI GRACE SMITH
Commercial Space Pioneer

By Keith Calhoun-Senghor, Scott Pace and Floyd DesChamps

We worked with Patti in the 1990s to shape the future of U.S. commercial space policy after the Cold War. Keith was director of the Office of Space Commerce at the Commerce Department; Scott was at the RAND Corp., supporting the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy; Floyd was senior advisor for the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation; and Patti was associate administrator for Commercial Space Transportation at the FAA and responsible for regulating commercial space transportation.

Patti was very effective at getting things done. Some of us regularly played poker with her, and you will never meet a craftier player. She was one of the most tenacious and effective political in-fighters we ever knew. Yet she had a great sense of humor and a joyous, freewheeling laugh. She never left her opponents feeling bloodied or humiliated.

Most people know Patti for her groundbreaking accomplishments in the 2000s, such as developing the first rules for commercial human spaceflight, licensing the first commercial spaceport (Mojave) and licensing the first commercial astronaut launch (SpaceShipOne). However, Patti’s work in the 1990s also was crucial, when commercial space was in its infancy.

At that time, GPS technology and global imaging satellites were largely thought of as military programs, and the commercial potential of the internet was in the starting blocks. Space tourism, commercial spaceports, private commercial launch on a large scale and ubiquitous global telecommunications satellite systems were still dreams. Yet Patti helped to imagine, articulate and execute forward-looking government policies that created the linkages between former Cold War programs and emerging information technologies to help usher in the age of “New Space”.

Her life and achievements span some of America’s finest moments and give proof to the brilliant potential that the U.S. has to offer. Like “Hidden Figures” from NASA’s history, Patti’s contributions helped make the U.S. the space leader it is today.

But nothing great comes without struggle. As a young girl, Patti experienced another side of America when she was among the first group of African American students to desegregate her hometown high school in Tuskegee, Alabama. It was a time when simply being Black was reason enough to fear for your safety or be legally excluded from the full opportunities this country had to offer. Even as a young girl, though, Patti proved that whatever life could dish out she could take with poise, dignity, and faith in God and the essential goodness of humanity.

In the searing heat of that crucible, with political leaders openly encouraging racial intolerance, Patti forged and tempered the tools that would serve her well throughout her life: belief in the triumph of justice over hate, recognition of the need to fight to protect the ideals that make this country great, deep love for her country and its varied people and boundless optimism in the future.

While not immediately apparent, the parallels between civil rights and commercial space are real. New Space offers future generations a viable economic path by opening new frontiers. Patti realized that the democratization of space and her work to create a truly inclusive society would clear paths for individuals with talent, passion and unbridled vision.

We all benefit when a child is given the opportunity to shine his or her light farther into the darkness, to imagine and discover what lies over the next horizon. Patti understood this. She never forgot the first exhilaration of spreading her wings as far as they would go and having them lift her as high as they would take her.

Patti died unexpectedly on June 5, 2016. Typically, she had told only a few people that she had cancer. Throughout her life, her individual suffering seemed almost beside the point. She was willing to pay a high price to defend principles and ideals larger than herself. She worked with selfless generosity to create a better future for her country and those coming behind her.

Our lives, on this planet and beyond, will be better because of her. We miss you, Patti. New Space misses you, too.

Keith Calhoun-Senghor, a Munich-based attorney, led the Office of Space Commerce from 1993 to 1999. This viewpoint is adapted from his upcoming book, The Fundamentals of Organizational Politics. Scott Pace, a professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, served as executive secretary of the National Space Council from 2017 to 2020. Floyd DesChamps is president of The Desner Group and was a senior advisor in the Senate from 1997 to 2009.