

Chapter Nine

Aftermath

I had asked Kalpana to inquire of Sunita Williams whether she would be willing to take on the responsibilities of Casualty Assistance Case Officer during the STS-107 mission. Sunita happily agreed, which pleased me greatly because she not only is a friend but also is familiar with Indian culture and could easily relate to Kalpana's family. She and another friend, Mukesh Patel, a Ugandan of Indian descent, about whom Kalpana said "He speaks a weird form of Hindi!", simultaneously arrived at our house soon after the accident. Upon landing at Ellington Field after flying back from Florida, astronaut Tracy Caldwell and Sue Morgan drove me home, where I met Janet Kavandi, Kalpana's 1995 astronaut classmate. It transpired that two additional Casualty Assistance Case Officers had been assigned to each family. I was extremely fortunate with Sunita, Tracy, and Janet, because we all got along very well. Though I never asked Janet, she must have faced challenges of her own at home, as she has two young children and an airline pilot husband who is necessarily absent for several days at a time. Nevertheless she spent many hours each day at my home with me and Kalpana's family.

The role of Casualty Assistance Case Officer was largely dependent on the family to which they were assigned. Some attempted to exert excessive influence over their charges; in my case, I neither needed nor wanted anyone making decisions on my behalf. Some of the other *Columbia* families changed Casualty Assistance Case Officers several times before finally settling down with someone with whom they could work. For one particular non-Casualty Assistance Case Officer astronaut who was an escort during the launch, his assignment as coordinator for a trip to Colorado to christen Columbia Peak was an opportunity to present himself in a favourable light to his superiors. This individual had the gall to tell me that I had to participate in the event — which I was very uncomfortable with — because "We want...". He also made it clear to one of my Casualty Assistance Case Officers that his planning was for the benefit of his NASA superiors, not the *Columbia* families.