

Patti Grace Smith, 1947-2016

Patti Grace Smith was an exceptional woman. Most of us in the space community knew her as one of the key leaders in facilitating the emergence of the U.S. commercial space industry that has captured the world's attention in recent years. It took acts of Congress, presidential policies, and dedicated people like Patti to turn "commercial space" from an idea into a reality.

Of course there are entrepreneurs and investors who come up with great ideas and money to implement them, but it also takes a government regulatory system to facilitate their emergence and nurture their growth. That's where the FAA's Office of Commercial Space Transportation (AST) plays such a vital role and the place where Patti made her mark in space policy.

Patti headed AST during a critical period (1997-2008) when SpaceShipOne won the X-Prize and many other commercial space endeavors were getting started. Her determination and faith in the potential of commercial space opened the door to many of the achievements we see today.

She was much more than a commercial space policy leader, however, as her family and friends recounted at her funeral this week. Patti died of pancreatic cancer on June 5 to the shock and sadness of her space colleagues. She was active in the space community until very recently and showed no outward signs of her illness.

An Alabama native, Patti played a leading role in the civil rights movement as a high school student (née Patricia Jones) who was one of 12 plaintiffs in the [1963 Lee vs. Macon County Board of Education](#) case that led to the desegregation of Alabama public schools. All who paid tribute to her recalled her as a devoted wife, mom, sister, aunt, and friend filled with warmth and laughter.

She will be missed by all of us in the space community as a calm, forceful advocate for commercial space; as a role model, especially for women; and for that great smile that conveyed her enthusiasm for and confidence in a bright future for the space program.

Obituaries in the [New York Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#) tell more of her story.