I am often reminded that, although there are some seven billion people on earth, we are all really interconnected and much closer than we ever imagined. We in the Travel & Tourism industry understand this more than most because we are in contact with vast numbers of travelers passing through our hotel lobbies, airports and visitor attractions year after year.

This week I was personally reminded of how small our world really is when I read news reports about two notable women who, by pure chance, brushed my life a number of years ago.

Sally Ride was the first American woman to fly in space. She studied physics and astrophysics at Stanford University at a time when few females were choosing that as an area of study, let alone a career. Nearing completion of her Ph.D. in 1978, she saw a newspaper ad from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), saying it was accepting applications from scientists and engineers who wanted to be an astronaut. Over 8,000 people applied but Ride was hired for one of just 35 available positions.

At that time, according to many reports I have seen, space flight was the ultimate boys’ club. Ride changed that and earned a place as a mission specialist on the 1983 launch of the space shuttle Challenger. She was not only the first American woman in space but, at age 32, the youngest astronaut as well.

There was a great deal of media attention and hoopla and some less than thoughtful members of the press tried to grab a headline by asking questions such as if she would wear a bra or makeup in space or whether she had ever cried on the job.

After two Challenger missions and retirement from NASA, she accepted academic positions at Stanford University and University of California, San Diego. She was committed to encouraging the interest of young people, especially girls, in science and engineering. She co-wrote seven science books for children and, through her company, Sally Ride Science, developed science-oriented school materials and teacher training programs.

She also accepted speaking engagements and that is how my path crossed hers in 1985. My wife Linda and I attended a conference held on a cruise ship as it traveled from Florida to Jamaica and back. Ride was one of the conference speakers, and we had a chance to hear her in formal presentations as well as in off the cuff conversations while relaxing around the ship and at meals. My memories of those occasions are that she was a wonderful human being with quiet confidence in herself and her career.

All those memories were stirred when I learned that Ride had died on July 23, at age 61, after a 17-month battle with pancreatic cancer.

Another notable person whose path crossed mine is Olympic swimmer Missy Franklin, who is currently earning gold medals in London (three at last count plus a bronze plus a world-record time in the 200-meter backstroke) and grabbing headlines almost daily. I

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I have seen a number of interviews with her on TV – this high school senior has an engaging personality, and I feel sure we will all be seeing a lot more of her over the years.

When Missy Franklin was born 17 years ago, her parents had a home next to ours in Colorado and, with Missy in a bassinette or roaming around as a toddler, we would see each other socially on occasion.

We all moved on to other locations and other activities and have not kept in touch, so I had no idea that Missy had gone on to become a championship swimmer until the names and photographs of her wonderful and dedicated parents, Dick and D.A. Franklin, began to appear in the media along with the news of their daughter.

Linda and I are cheering for Missy and wish her and her parents all the best.

Frigyes Karinthy, a Hungarian author, playwright and journalist who died 74 years ago, is said to be the person who first developed the idea about how interconnected people are through his 1929 short story “Chains.” This evolved into the concept of Six Degrees of Separation, which holds that no person is more than six introductions away from any other person on earth.

In today’s world of the Internet, the number of introductions is rapidly shrinking. In November 2011, the social media company Facebook released a study indicating that among its users* there were, on average, only 4.74 degrees of separation!

What I conclude from all this is that all the people any of us meet in our hotel corridors, restaurants, shops, front desks and beaches are interconnected rather closely with everyone else on earth – and the gap is narrowing every day. What we do or say and what we don’t do or say will be remembered and possibly spread as good or bad news around the world in a flash on Facebook, Trip Advisor or some new program scheduled for release any day now.

Yes, it really is a small, small world! 😊

* Facebook user count: 720 million in November 2011 – around 900 million today, depending on who is counting.