NEARLY a year after the shuttle disaster took the lives of the seven Challenger astronauts, their families are trying to cope with a world of complex finances, intense public attention, and grief still fresh and deep.

"There hasn't been a hour in the day that I haven't thought of him in some way," said Carl McNair, whose son, Dr. Ronald E. McNair, was a mission physicist on the doomed flight.

Memories are being rekindled as NASA prepares now to bury the Challenger debris retrieved from the ocean.

The burial, planned for a missile silo at Cape Canaveral, has been delayed by the Justice Department pending settlement of claims by astronaut families, said Dick Young, a spokesman for the agency. Legal experts say the wreckage could be used as evidence in lawsuits against the Government.

To date, two families have taken legal action to seek damages. The Government announced last week that four other families had agreed to accept payments in settlement of all potential claims, including any against the space agency and its contractors. Critics have charged that the Government is using taxpayer money to compensate for contractor errors.

Meanwhile, the families have also embarked on creation of a $50 million science center to memorialize the crew, and have participated in scores of tributes around the nation.

For the families, all the activity and controversy have taken their toll. "Normally, you begin to accept grief," said William F. Maready, a lawyer representing the widow of one of the astronauts. "But these folks have had to go to one ceremony after another. That, plus all the news, the frenzy of things, has created a situation in which their lives have not slowed down for it to settle in. That's just beginning."

As the anniversary of the disaster approaches, plans are underway for a new round of tributes to the seven who died Jan. 28 when a leaky booster rocket touched off an explosion that destroyed the Challenger.

Jim Scobee, whose brother Francis R. (Dick) Scobee commanded the Challenger, said he found solace in the testimonials. "People have been terrific," he said. But for Bruce Jarvis, father of payload specialist Gregory B. Jarvis, tributes have been bittersweet. "The pain is always there," he said. "All the kindness brings it back."

The families grief eased somewhat as they banded together to create a living memorial to the crew: the Challenger Center for Space Science Education. Its aim is to offer children the type of lessons that Christa McAuliffe, a Concord, N.H., high school teacher, planned to present from space.

June Scobee, Mr. Scobee's widow, took a leave of absence in May from her job as professor of education at the University of Houston to devote herself to the center. Acting as a spokeswoman for the seven families, she said the goal was to raise $25 million for an endowment and $25 million for two buildings, one near NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston and one in Washington, D.C.

"It began when we all came together in my home and began talking about memorials people had in mind," Mrs. Scobee recalled. "We found all our spouses had thought the teaching from space was the most important part of the mission. So we decided to try to keep that goal alive, to help them complete the mission. It's like picking up where they left off." 'A Vision of Hope'

She said the center would house a mock spacecraft in which selected students would dress as astronauts to perform experiments on an imaginary flight 100 years in the future. The missions are to be broadcast live to schoolrooms linked by computer and satellite. Children in distant schools are to act as mission controllers.
"We thought it would be a way of looking to the future with a vision of hope," Mrs. Scobee said.

James S. Rosebush, acting president of the Challenger Center, said $250,000 had so far been raised, mostly from aerospace companies that built the nation's fleet of shuttles. He said Rockwell International, which makes the winged spaceplanes, donated $100,000; Martin Marietta, builder of the external fuel tanks, gave $50,000. He said he hoped for a contribution from Morton Thiokol, maker of the shuttle's flawed booster rockets.

"There's been an outpouring of grass-roots support," he said, noting that the center is receiving about 1,000 donations every week. Donations for Children

Linda Reppert, whose sister, Dr. Judith A. Resnik, was a Challenger mission specialist, said the families had gained strength from working with one another on the project. "The positive thing has been the closeness," she said.

Shortly after the explosion, one of the ways the nation expressed sympathy for the families was through donations to the Space Shuttle Children's Fund, established within hours of the disaster by American Security Bank in Washington, D.C.

According to Roger W. Conner, an American Security vice president, the non-profit charitable trust has received $1.2 million in donations for the astronaut's 11 children, who range in age from 2 to 25. He said the fund, earmarked mainly for their education and secondarily for their health, support and maintenance, had paid out $90,000 to the astronaut families. The bank charges no administrative or legal fees, he said.

"Most of the contributions came in a month or two after the tragedy," Mr. Conner said. "But we're still getting various monies."

After the explosion, lawyers said astronaut families might well seek damages. That expectation grew as a Presidential Commission probed the Challenger disaster and found a string of seriously flawed judgments by the space agency and its contractors. To some observers, the process turned the seven astronauts from heros to victims.

In June, the Presidential Commission released a 256-page final report that said the disaster had a single physical cause, the failure of a rocket joint. The report said NASA headquarters in Washington knew enough about the problem five months before the disaster to have required repair of all rockets before they boosted any more shuttles into space.

After the report came out, Mrs. Scobee was asked if she planned legal steps. "If money would bring him back, I would sue for millions," she replied. "All that was important to me was him, and nothing will bring him back."

Legal Action by Families

Legal experts said that families of Challenger's military officers and NASA astronauts were barred from suing the Government but could file administrative claims or take action against the maker of the flawed booster rocket, Morton Thiokol of Brigham City, Utah.

In July, Mrs. Jane Smith, widow of Challenger's pilot, Navy Commander Michael J. Smith, filed a $15 million administrative claim against the Government for wrongful death of her husband. NASA had made "terrible judgments" and shown "shockingly sparse concern for human life," she said.

The Government has until late this week to respond to Mrs. Smith's claim, after which she can file suit. "Our first effort is try to settle it out of court," said her lawyer, Mr. Maredy, who added he had met with Justice Department officials. "If that fails, you do the next best thing, bring a civil action."
In September, Mrs. Cheryl McNair, Dr. McNair's widow, sued Thiokol for an undisclosed amount. "To do nothing would be a tacit acquiescence or stamp of approval of the type of conduct that took my husband's life," she said.

On Dec. 29, the Justice Department announced that families of Mr. Scobee, Mr. Jarvis, Mrs. McAuliffe, and Air Force Lieut. Col. Ellison S. Onizuka had agreed to settle "all potential claims" against the Government, the space agency and its contractors in exchange for "payments over an extended period of time." It said Thiokol would contribute an undisclosed amount toward the settlement. Although the department would name no figure, each family was reportedly in line for at least $750,000.

Amy Brown, a Justice Department spokesman, said in an interview that negotiations began after the department was approached by an intermediary whom she would not name, acting in behalf of the families. She also declined to say whether anyone other than the families and the Government were party to the settlement. "The families have been through a lot and asked us to keep it confidential out of respect for their privacy," she said.

Criticism of Settlement

Ronald D. Krist, a Houston attorney who has sued Morton Thiokol on behalf of Mrs. McNair, said the settlement was fundamentally unfair. "The paying ones should be Morton Thiokol, not the taxpayers," he said. He noted that when three Apollo astronauts were killed in a launching pad fire in 1967, the contractor, North American Rockwell, made payments to their widows.

The astronaut families have received financial aid in ways other than through settlements or private donations. A Washington insurance broker, Corroon & Black In Space Inc., insured Mrs. McAuliffe's life for $1 million through Lloyd's of London. According to Brian Stockwell, a company official, Mrs. McAuliffe's family collected the money soon after the disaster.

The families of the two military officers on board the Challenger are eligible for military death benefits. And the families of three NASA astronauts are paid under the Federal Employees Compensation Act, a program similar to a workers' compensation plan.

Dr. L. John Lawrence, a spokesman at the Johnson Space Flight Center in Houston, said compensation payments came to 55 percent of an astronaut's pension, which is based on salary and projected years of service through normal retirement. NASA keeps private the specifics of such payments.

Mr. Scobee, 46, a NASA astronaut and former Air Force test pilot, was Challenger's commander. The space agency paid him an annual salary of $54,004. He and Mrs. Scobee had two children, Kathie, 25, and Richard, 22.

Commander Smith of the Navy, 40, a jet fighter pilot assigned to the space agency as astronaut, was Challenger's pilot. The Navy paid him $53,343 a year. He and his wife Jane had three children, Scott, 17, Alison, 15, and Erin, 9.

Colonel Onizuka of the Air Force, 39, an aerospace engineer assigned to the space agency as astronaut, was a mission specialist on the flight. The Air Force paid him $48,398 a year. He and his wife Lorna had two children, Janelle Mitsue, 17, and Darien Lei Shizue, 11.

Dr. McNair, 35, a physicist and NASA astronaut, was a mission specialist aboard Challenger. He earned $54,004 a year. He had been planning to leave the space agency for a job at the University of South Carolina. He and Mrs. McNair had two children, Reginald, 4, and Joy, 2.
Dr. Resnik, 36, an electrical engineer and NASA astronaut, was a mission specialist. She earned $54,004 a year and was the only unmarried member of the Challenger crew. Her parents have given no indication whether they plan to seek compensation from the Government.

Mr. Jarvis, 41, a civilian electrical engineer, had been assigned to the mission as a payload specialist for the Space and Communications group of Hughes Aircraft Company, where he worked. A spokesman at Hughes Air Force test pilot, declined to answer any questions about Mr. Jarvis' salary, benefits or insurance coverage. He and his wife Marcia had no children.

Mrs. McAuliffe, 37, a civilian, was part of NASA's Teacher in Space Project and the first ordinary citizen scheduled to orbit the earth. She is survived by her husband, Steven, a lawyer, and their two children, Scott, 10, and Caroline, 7. IN MEMORY OF THE SEVEN

The Challenger Center for Space Science Education was organized by the astronauts' families to carry out the teaching efforts of Christa McAuliffe, who was to have been the first teacher in space. Donations can be sent to: Challenger Center, P. O. Box 90077, Washington, D.C., 20090.

The Space Shuttle Children's Fund supports the education of the astronaut's 11 children. Donations can be sent to: Space Shuttle Children's Fund, American Security Bank, Lock Box 0150, Washington, D.C., 20055

photos of the families of astronauts killed in the space shuttle Challenger disaster