



Pioneering Backstory

When Mae Jemison was born in Decatur, Alabama, in 1956, no one would have predicted that she would break new ground by one day orbiting the Earth.

The child of a roofer/carpenter and an elementary school teacher, Jemison grew up in Chicago. Her parents relocated to Chicago when Jemison was three years old, to give their children better educational opportunities. As a kindergartener who knew how to read when she entered school, Jemison surprised her teacher by telling her she wanted to be a scientist. The choice was unusual for any girl, let alone an African-American girl, in 1961, but Jemison never wavered.

Throughout her academic career, Jemison was an outstanding student. She had a variety of interests outside of school, including dance and theater. In 1973, she accepted a National Achievement Scholarship and entered Stanford University. After graduating with a bachelor of science degree in chemical engineering (and having fulfilled the requirements for a bachelor of arts degree in African and Afro-American Studies), she enrolled in Cornell University Medical College and in 1981 became a general practitioner. Pursuing her interest in global medicine, which had taken her to Cuba, Kenya and Thailand during medical school, she served as a Peace Corps medical officer for more than two years in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

When she returned to the United States in 1985, Jemison decided she wanted to expand her horizons still farther. Pursuing a long-held dream, she applied for admission to NASA's astronaut training program. The Challenger disaster of January 1986 deferred her dreams temporarily, but when she reapplied a year later, NASA selected her as one of 15 astronaut candidates (from a field of 2,000 applicants).

That selection began a string of "firsts" for Jemison. She was the first African-American woman admitted to the training program and became the first African-American woman astronaut. On Sept. 12, 1992, she became the first African-American woman in space as a science mission specialist on the crew of the Endeavour. The eight-day mission orbited Earth 127 times and included 44 Japanese and U.S. life science and materials processing experiments.

Jemison left the astronaut corps in March 1993 and accepted the Montgomery Fellowship, a teaching position at Dartmouth College. She also established the Jemison Group, a company that researches, develops and markets advanced technologies.

Jemison's achievements have been recognized with several honorary doctorates, the 1988 Essence Science and Technology Award and the 1992 Ebony Black Achievement Award. She was named Gamma Sigma Gamma Woman of the Year in 1989, and in 1992, Detroit, Michigan, bestowed her name on an alternative public school, the Mae C. Jemison Academy.

These recognitions spotlight how Jemison's achievements throughout her career have blended her fascination with science, African-American history, and different cultures, as well as her passion for civil rights and equality that stems from growing up during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s through 1970s.

"When I'm asked about the relevance to Black people of what I do, I take that as an affront," Jemison has said. "[That question] presupposes that Black people have never been involved in exploring the heavens, but this is not so. Ancient African empires—Mali, Songhai, Egypt—had scientists, astronomers. The fact is that space and its resources belong to all of us, not to any one group."

Most of all, Jemison has set a stunning example of how someone with capability and ambition can carve a new path to achieving their highest goals—even beyond Earth's atmosphere.

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