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EXPLAINER

Mae Jemison

Ezzy Pearson celebrates the 30th anniversary of the first Black woman flying in space



An accomplished engineer and doctor, Jemison flew aboard Space Shuttle Endeavour in September 1992

When Mae Jemison was 12 years old, she watched enraptured as Neil Armstrong took his first steps across the surface of the Moon during the Apollo landing. But there was one thing that upset her: none of the people being sent into space looked like her. Later in life, she would be the one to change that. Thirty years ago this month, on 12 September 1992, Jemison became the first Black woman to fly in space.

“As a little girl growing up on the south side of Chicago in the ‘60s I always knew I was going to be in space,” Jemison said in a 2013 speech at Duke University.

There was, however, one Black female space-farer Jemison could turn to as a role model in her youth, albeit a fictional one: *Star Trek*’s Lieutenant Nyota Uhura,

played by Nichelle Nichols. Encouraged by her example, Jemison pursued the sciences, eventually attaining her medical degree in 1981.

During her early career, Jemison served as a general practitioner, conducted relief work throughout Africa with the Peace Corps, helped research vaccines with the Centre for Disease Control and, somehow, also found time to learn Russian, Japanese and Swahili. Then in 1985, Sally Ride became the first American woman to fly in space, rekindling Jemison’s long-held dreams.

“I picked up the phone. I called down to Johnson Space Center. I said ‘I would like to be an astronaut’. They didn’t laugh! I turned in the application,” Jemison told the website *The Mary Sue* in 2018.

In 1987, 2,000 people applied to join NASA’s Astronaut Group 12. Fifteen were accepted, including Jemison. After

completing her training, in 1989 she was assigned to STS-47, a joint mission with the Japanese space agency on which she would conduct a myriad of materials and life science experiments alongside her fellow astronauts.

A dream realised

After a three-year wait, Jemison finally achieved her dream on 12 September 1992 when the Space Shuttle Endeavour blasted off on mission STS-47. She spent eight days in space, orbiting Earth 127 times. As a nod to the woman who inspired her, Jemison would open communications every shift by repeating Uhura’s signature phrase, “Hailing frequencies open”.

Keen to represent people who hadn’t been seen in space before, she brought several artefacts with her including a statue from the women’s society of Bundu

Nichelle Nichols and NASA

The actress helped convince the world that everyone had a place at NASA

In 1977, NASA reopened astronaut training for the first time since 1969, to find the dozens of crew members needed for the upcoming Space Shuttle programme. But there was one problem: despite now accepting applications from women and from people of colour, the years of being shut out of NASA were discouraging them from applying.

With a few months left before applications closed, NASA joined forces with the most famous Black female astronaut of the day:

Star Trek's Lieutenant Uhura herself, Nichelle Nichols. The actress was well aware of her place as a role model, having been told by Martin Luther King

NASA's 1977 recruitment film featuring the *Star Trek* star

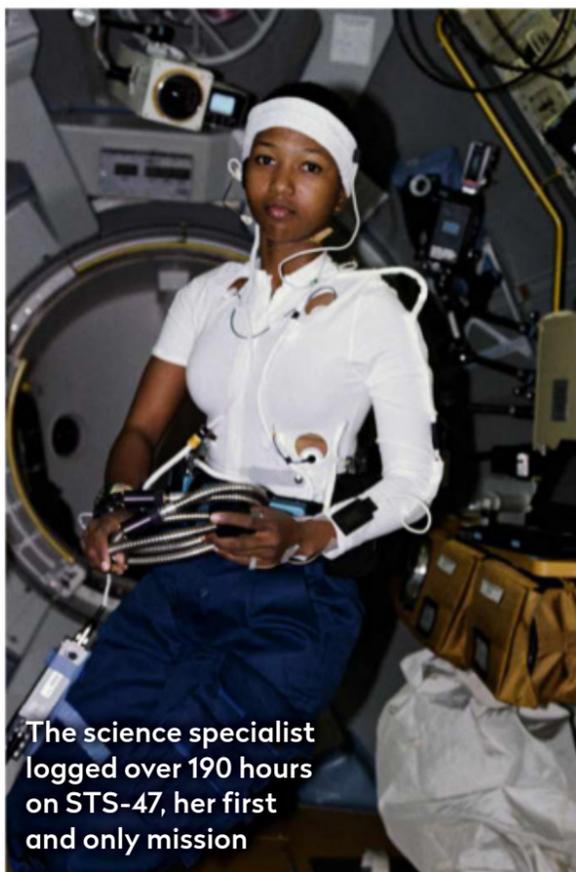


Jr about its importance. She had already begun advocating for more diversity in the space sector, but by joining forces with NASA she was able to conduct a

campaign tour across the US, convincing potential astronauts that not only did the agency now accept people of colour and women, but that they were also a welcome and needed part of space exploration.

The initiative paid off. NASA's 35-member astronaut class of 1978 contained the first female astronaut (Sally Ride), the first African American astronaut (Guion Bluford) and the first Asian American astronaut (Ellison Onizuka). Nichols continued to help recruit

new astronauts into the late 1980s and has been credited as an inspiration by dozens of astronauts, scientists and administrators, including Mae Jemison.



The science specialist logged over 190 hours on STS-47, her first and only mission

in West Africa and a pennant from the first African American sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha.

She returned to Earth on 20 September, completing what would be her only flight. In 1993 she left NASA but continued to advocate for science education, particularly among minority students. Since then she has founded the Jemison Group Inc, which investigates the social and cultural impacts of technological advancements, and the Dorothy Jemison Foundation for Excellence (named after



Appearing on *Star Trek*, the show that inspired her, shortly after her return

her mother) which helps children to develop 'personal excellence', as well as taking professorships at Dartmouth College and Cornell University.

Jemison's space journey came full circle in 1993 when LeVar Burton, the actor who played Geordi La Forge on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, discovered that Jemison was a fan of the show and invited her to appear. She played Lieutenant Palmer in a cameo appearance in the episode Second

to another star within the next 100 years.

"We need to make sure we're using the full wealth of human talent: across

ethnicity, across gender, across geography, across

disciplines," Jemison said to PBS's *Nova* programme in 2015.

"All the capabilities that are needed for a successful journey to another star system by humans, are all the capabilities that we need to sustain ourselves as humans on this planet. And so we believe pursuing an extraordinary tomorrow creates a better world today." 🌍



▲ In Spacelab-J, where her research ranged from frog fertility to motion sickness