

The Explorers: Dr. Mae C. Jemison

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A photo of Dr. Mae Jemison, taken in 1992. NASA

Synopsis: Astronaut and physician Mae C. Jemison was the first African-American woman in space. She was born in 1956 in Decatur, Alabama. In June 1987, Jemison was the first African-American woman to be admitted into the astronaut training program. Five years later, she flew into space with six other astronauts aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour. Jemison has earned several awards and honorary degrees.

An Early Fascination With Astronomy

Mae C. Jemison was born on October 17, 1956, in Decatur, Alabama. She was the youngest child of Charlie Jemison, a roofer and a carpenter, and Dorothy (Green) Jemison, a teacher. The family, including Jemison's sister Ada and brother Charles, moved to Chicago, Illinois, in search of better schools. Jemison was just 3 years old at the time. She calls Chicago her hometown.

When she was young, Jemison spent a lot of time in her school library. There, she read about all kinds of science, especially astronomy, the study of stars, planets, and other objects in outer space. In high school, Jemison decided that she wanted to become a biomedical engineer. She was interested in using science to create new products and devices to help the human body. Biomedical engineers design such things as pacemakers

to regulate the beats of ailing hearts, artificial skin for burn victims and cancer patients, artificial joints for older people and artificial arms and legs for people who have lost limbs to war injuries, accidents, cancer or other diseases.

Jemison's parents were supportive. They encouraged her to use her talents. She graduated from high school with honors in 1973 and earned a National Achievement Scholarship. The academic scholarship is given to outstanding African-American high school students. The scholarship helped pay her way through Stanford University in California.

Degrees In Engineering And Medicine

Jemison was only 16 when she started her freshman year of college at Stanford, one of the best universities in the world. While in college, she took part in a number of activities in addition to studying. She took dance lessons and performed in the theater. Jemison even served as head of the Black Student Union, a social, cultural and political group. After earning a degree in chemical engineering in 1977, she entered Cornell University Medical College in New York. While a medical student, she studied in other countries. Jemison went to Cuba and Kenya. She also worked at a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand.

Jemison became a medical doctor in 1981. She began practicing medicine in Los Angeles, California. She later moved to the west coast of Africa and worked as the area Peace Corps medical officer in the countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia. The Peace Corps is a United States-funded group that trains and sends American volunteers to help poor people in other countries.

First African-American Female Astronaut

Jemison returned to the United States in 1985. She decided to chase another dream by applying to the astronaut training program at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The January 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster delayed the selection process. The shuttle exploded 73 seconds into its flight, and all seven crew members died.

Jemison joined NASA in June 1987, one of only 15 astronaut candidates chosen out of 2,000 applicants. She was the first African-American woman to enter the astronaut program. After more than a year of training, she became the first African-American female astronaut.

She finally flew into space on September 12, 1992, with six other astronauts aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour. The first thing she saw from space was Chicago, her hometown. For eight days, Jemison conducted experiments on the crew and herself. These experiments were on motion sickness and weightlessness. She spent more than 190 hours in orbit before returning to Earth. After the historic flight, Jemison said that society should

recognize how much women and members of minority groups can contribute. Minorities are smaller groups of people who differ in ways such as race or religion from people in larger groups in a country, a town, a company or a school.

Winning Honors And Recognition

Jemison has received a number of awards. Some universities even gave her their highest degrees. She received the 1988 Essence Science and Technology Award, the 1992 Ebony Black Achievement Award, and a Montgomery Fellowship from Dartmouth College in 1993. Jemison was also named Gamma Sigma Gamma Woman of the Year in 1990. A public school in Detroit, Michigan, was named the Mae C. Jemison Academy in 1992.

Jemison is also a member of several important medical and scientific groups.

Dr. Mae Jemison left the NASA Astronaut Corps in March 1993. She then took a teaching and research position at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. She also founded the Jemison Group, a company that creates and sells advanced technologies.