Mae C. Jemison is an American engineer, physician, writer, professor, NASA Astronaut and known as the first African American woman to travel in space. Throughout her life she had to deal with gender and racial issues but her belief in herself, her hard work and commitment payed off and let her achieve all her goals.

Nowadays she tries to encourage and inspire others to pursue careers in science and medicine or to climb up the career ladder and hold respected positions in their field. She received global recognition not only for achieving her goals, but also for her contribution to the African and African-American societies. Nevertheless, she does not want to be only seen as a role model for black girls, as she is often announced, but rather as a role model for everybody, also an older white male who could start his science career because of a "little black girl" like her. On top of that, Mae C. Jemison is a highly sought after speaker on issues of health care, social responsibility, technology and motivation and therefore one of the most important women of the USA.

**Birth Date:** October 17, 1956  
**Place of Birth:** Decatur, Alabama  
**Nationality:** American  
**Occupation/Field of Study**  
An American engineer, physician, NASA Astronaut and the first African American woman to travel in space.  
**Tags:** Astronaut | Biography | Engineer | Mae C. Jemison | Physics; NASA | Science  

**KEYWORDS:** Science, Biography, Physics; NASA, Engineer, Mae C. Jemison, Astronaut.
Mae C. Jemison was born on the 17th of October in 1956 in Decatur, Alabama. Her father, Charlie Jemison, was a supervisor of maintenance for the United Charities of Chicago as well as a contractor and a roofer. Her mother, Dorothy Jemison, was a schoolteacher in Chicago at the Beethoven school. Mae's parents were encouraging their children from a young age that if they believe in their dreams and work hard for it, anything would be possible. Her older sister, Ada Jemison Bullock, became a child psychiatrist, and her older brother, Charles Jemison, a real estate broker in Chicago. For Mae, the exhortation of her parents was becoming her mantra, as she was setting herself the goal of becoming an astronaut and scientist: “In kindergarten my teacher asked me—actually asked the whole class—now what do you want to be when you grow up? And I said, 'I want to be a scientist.' And she looked at me and she said, 'Don't you mean a nurse?' Now clearly, there is no issue with being a nurse. But the issue back then was, is that the only thing she could see a little girl growing up to do, that had something to do with sciences. So she was trying to help guide me and counsel me [...]. But I really just put my hands on my hips, and I said, ‘No, I mean a scientist’”. Mae felt already as a child that she had the ability to make a difference in what happens in the world and she worked without any doubts very hard for achieving her goal.

With only 16 years she graduated from Morgan Park High school and entered with a scholarship into Stanford University as a science major after rejecting MIT. Unfortunately, at the University she had to deal for the first time in her life with gender and race issues in the role of an outsider: “I felt totally invisible. At times, they would look through me. My questions would be handled in a condescending way, and even be ignored, or not answered. It was a new experience for me because I had been used to teachers and professors showing active interest in my quest for knowledge. Additionally, they did show active interest, at least they seemed to, in other students”. However, Mae decided to not let them put her down but to keep on going and follow her dreams. During her time at the University she also got involved in extracurricular activities and began researching and learning a lot about space travel. It was her friend, Sam Drenard, a Stanford graduate, who introduced her to the NASA space program and told her to apply for the mission on the space shuttle Challenger. Despite of her interest, Mae delayed her application until she felt more than qualified for the position. Before that was the case, Mae firstly graduated from Stanford University in 1977 with a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering and a second degree in Political Science-African-American Studies. In 1981 she then completed her medical studies at the Cornell University with a specialisation in biomedical engineering research. During her studies she also earned a grant to travel to Kenya in order to work with the African Medical Research and Education Foundation which is known as the Flying Doctors, and worked as a volunteer in Cuba and in a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand. Later on she pursued an internship at the Los Angeles County-University of Southern California Medical Center. After being a general practitioner with the INA/Ross Loss Medical Group in Los Angeles in 1982, Mae returned, at the age of 26, again back to Africa, to Sierra Leone, where she became the youngest Area Peace Corps Medical Officer in history. After two years in Africa, Mae returned to the USA where she started to work with CIGNA Health Plans of California and also began taking engineering classes. At this time, Mae felt that she was finally well enough prepared for the NASA expedition and proceeded to apply. In 1987 she received her acceptance by NASA as one of fifteen astronaut candidates and certainly started her training for the shuttle Endeavor mission. Mae was assigned as a mission specialist on the STS-47, Spacelab-J, a cooperative venture between the United States and Japan to perform experiments in life sciences and materials processing. She claimed that it was never her goal to be the first black female astronaut but rather to be in space in general.

However, on the 11th of September in 1992, Dr. Mae C. Jemison became the first African-American woman to travel into space and thus a great role model for many women and men across the world. After six successful years at NASA, Mae left in 1993 and founded the Jemison Group, Inc. that aims to “research, develop, and implement advanced technologies suited to the social, political, cultural, and economic context of the individual, especially for the developing world”. Her work in West Africa made her witness the lack of knowledge that people had about space travel and she thought it was too simple to just think that the poor population can’t take advantage of space exploration: “The reality is the majority of us will not get off this planet [...] So the long run is, some kind of space exploration has to benefit us here on earth”. She also founded the Dorothy Jemison Foundation for Excellence, named after her mother, as well as the international science camp The Earth We Share (TEWS) which is an experiential residential program for youth designed to build critical thinking and problem solving skills as well as science literacy. Besides, she was working as an environmental studies professor at Dartmouth College from 1995 to 2002 and is currently an A.D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University. Since 2011 she is working on her The 100 Year Starship project, which works on probably her biggest goal, to send humans into space with a full 100 years.

Mae C. Jemison is not only the first African-American woman who travelled in space but also a great impact on our society. She is constantly trying the world to become a better place and therefore a great role model for everybody despite of their gender, age, financial status or origin.
**SHE SAID IT**

“The thing that I have done throughout my life is to do the best job that I can and to be me.”


“When I’m asked about the relevance to black people of what I do, I take that as an affront. It presupposes that black people have never been involved in exploring the heavens, but this is not so. Ancient African empires-Mahi, Songhai, Egypt-had scientists, astronomers. The fact is that space and its resources belong to all of us, not to any one group ... If we're not there from the beginning, helping to determine what happens to these resources, we'll have no say in how they are used.”


“I wanted everyone to know that space belongs to all of us. There is science in dance and art in science. It belongs to everyone.”


“Never be limited by other people's limited imaginations...If you adopt their attitudes, then the possibility won't exist because you'll have already shut it out ... You can hear other people's wisdom, but you've got to re-evaluate the world for yourself.”


“Never limit yourself because of others' limited imagination; never limit others because of your own limited imagination.”


**PRIZES, ACHIEVEMENTS, HONOURS**

1988: Essence Science and Technology Award
1989: Gamma Sigma Gamma Woman of the Year
1991: Honorary doctorate of science at Lincoln College PA.
1991: One of McCall's 10 Outstanding Women for the 90's
1992: Ebony Black Achievement Award
1992: Mae C. Jemison Academy, an alternative public school named after her
1992: Johnson Publications Black Achievement Trailblazers Award
1992: Mae C. Jemison Science and Space Museum at Wright Junior College in Chicago
1993: Montgomery Fellowship from Dartmouth College
1993: One of the women on Ebony's Most Influential Women list
1993: Turner Trumpet Award
1993: Kilby Science Award
1993: Part of the National Women's Hall of Fame
1993: People's magazine as one of the “50 Most Beautiful People in the World”
1998: Selected by the White House Project as one of 20 women with the possibility of becoming U.S. President

BRIDGING GAPS

Despite of her great interest in space, Mae C. Jemison is also very interested in modern jazz, African dance and theatre (p. 160). During her student years she enjoyed directing, choreographing as well as performing (p. 160). Her other interests include aerobic exercise, skiing, photography, weight training, reading, studying languages and collecting African art. She speaks fluent Russian, Japanese, and Swahili.

INTERTEXTUAL MATERIALS

In 1933 Mae Jemison was the first astronaut who appeared on the Series Star Trek. She played the role of Lieutenant junior grade Palmer in the episode “Second Chances”, which was the 150th episode of the series. It was up to LeVar Burton, who played Geordi La Forge on Star Trek, who heard that she was a huge Star Trek fan and asked her if she would like to be on the show.

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