

Mae Jemison: Astronaut

Many children dream of one day becoming an astronaut. Most lose interest as they get older or are not among the few who are chosen by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Mae Jemison was one of the select few. She knew from the time she was a little girl that she wanted to be an astronaut. Jemison worked hard and persevered despite the odds against her and became the first African American woman in space on September 12, 1992.

Mae Jemison was born in Decatur, Alabama, on October 17, 1956,

but she grew up in Chicago, Illinois. Jemison's parents relocated to Chicago for the better educational opportunities that city offered. Jemison's family continued to foster her scientific interests. Her path was difficult because of biases against her as both an African American and as a female interested in science. However, Jemison excelled in school and attended renowned Stanford University on a scholarship when she was only sixteen years old. She received bachelor's degrees in chemical engineering and African American studies there in 1977. She then earned a medical doctorate at Cornell University in 1981. After working in her field, Jemison joined the Peace Corps. For two and a half years, she provided medical treatment in the African countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone. After this experience, Jemison returned home to the United States to pursue her

dream of becoming an astronaut.

Unfortunately, a huge blow to the American space program came in January 1986, when space shuttle *Challenger* exploded in midair shortly after liftoff. Mae Jemison was not deterred, and—even though NASA's application process was delayed by the tragedy—she was accepted along with only fifteen others out of nearly two thousand applicants. On June 4, 1987, Jemison was accepted as the first-ever African American woman to join NASA's astronaut training program. This would prove to be the first in a string of firsts for Jemison. Her next accomplishment was the successful completion of her training to become the first fully-fledged female African American astronaut. Specifically, Jemison was given the title of science mission specialist—the crewmember responsible for conducting sci-

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Mae Jemison

Stanford University

Chicago

Cornell University

Decatur
Born October 17, 1956

Kennedy Space Center
Space Shuttle *Endeavour* Launch
September 12, 1992

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tific experiments.

The greatest achievement for Mae Jemison came on September 12, 1992. On that date, space shuttle *Endeavor* lifted off, taking with it the first African American female astronaut. The mission lasted eight days and was a joint effort between the United States and Japan. Jemison carried out experiments testing the effects of weightlessness and motion sickness on herself and the rest of the crew. She also investigated bone loss as an effect of being in space. During her work for NASA, Jemison also worked in computer programming and in supporting

the launch at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

Since her voyage into space, Mae Jemison has resigned from NASA to focus more on her interests in social science and technology. She founded The Jemison Group to help find a way to bring her various interests together and use them to help the general public. The Jemison Group has helped develop solar electricity generators and satellite communications to bring medical care to remote areas of West Africa. Jemison also served as a professor of environmental studies at Dartmouth College from 1995 to 2002. You can

learn more about her from her own words. She published a book of autobiographical stories called *Find Where the Wind Goes: Moments from My Life*, in 2001.

Mae Jemison's life has been marked by one achievement after another, both in scientific advancement and in bridging race and gender barriers. From providing medical aid, to making technological breakthroughs, to blasting in to space, and even to appearing in an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Jemison has proved to herself and to minority groups across America that dreams do come true.



CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS PRACTICE

ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

Identifying: *What is Jemison most famous for?*

Explaining: *What challenges did Jemison face in her schooling, and why?*

Providing an Opinion: *What do you think is Jemison's biggest accomplishment?*

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CLASSROOM RESOURCES

<http://www.graduatingengineer.com/articles/19990929/A-Space-to-Call-Her-Own>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/blogs/secretlife/space-science/mae-jemison/>

https://www.ted.com/talks/mae_jemison_on_teaching_arts_and_sciences_together

SOURCES

<https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/she-had-dream-mae-c-jemison-first-african-american-woman-space>

<http://www.biography.com/people/mae-c-jemison-9542378#first-african-american-female-astronaut>

<https://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/jemison-mc.html>



Becky Sicking:

Becky Sicking has had a 15-year career as an editor and academic designer for McGraw-Hill Education, one of the top education publishers in the industry. Her area of expertise is middle school Social Studies where she recently spearheaded the digital development of a national world geography program.

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