

Among the Stars

Katherine Johnson is among the stars of early space exploration. She used her mathematical abilities to send astronauts into space and get them safely back home again. She used her inner strength and perseverance to overcome barriers that stood in her way due to her race and gender. Katherine was an amazing Black woman who reached for the sky and beyond.

Katherine was born in West Virginia in 1918. She was talented at math from an early age and started high school when she was only 10 years old. She went to college at the age of 15. When she graduated, she took a job teaching math to African American children. She enrolled in graduate school to study math but ended up leaving to start a family.

When Katherine was 34 years old, she saw an advertisement for jobs for Black women with mathematical abilities. She answered the ad and went to work at NACA, which later became NASA. She and the other Black women who were hired worked as “human computers.” They calculated the formulas needed to go into space.

In her role as a computer, Katherine calculated the path of the United States’ first human space flight in 1961. She also figured out the path for John Glenn to orbit the Earth and return safely. In 1969, she was part of the team that did the calculations for Apollo 11’s mission to the moon.



The white male astronauts that Katherine helped travel to space received fame and fortune. Katherine, and the other Black female computers did not. In 2016, the movie *Hidden Figures* was made to finally tell their story.

Katherine lived to be 101. She died in 2020 and was honored by NASA for her important contributions to space travel.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. What was Katherine's first job?
 - a. Human computer
 - b. Maid
 - c. Math teacher
 - d. Science teacher

2. What job was Katherine hired for at NACA (later NASA)?
 - a. Astronaut
 - b. Human Computer
 - c. Maid
 - d. Engineer

3. Which mission is NOT mentioned in the passage as one that Katherine helped with?
 - a. John Glenn's orbit of the Earth
 - b. Apollo 11
 - c. The first manned spaceflight
 - d. Space Shuttle Challenger

4. Why do you think the computers were not recognized in the same way as the astronauts?
 - a. Because their jobs were easy
 - b. Because of racism
 - c. Because of sexism
 - d. Because of racism and sexism

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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