



AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AND STEM

“The women did what they were told to do. They didn’t ask questions or take the task any further. I asked questions; I wanted to know why. They got used to me asking questions and being the only woman there.” Katherine Coleman Goble Johnson, African-American Physicist and Mathematician regarding her career at National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the predecessor to NASA.

Many people have expressed thoughts and metaphors surrounding the recent death of a popular American actress. Some are alluding to her “innovative” work on behalf of women through her television character, the consensus being that she made it “okay” to be a distinctive working woman. Recently, the critical work done by the African-American women of Langley’s West Computing Unit, National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the predecessor to NASA, has come to light. In the early 1960s Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, Dorothy Vaughan and others, known as “human computers” – were instrumental in launching American rockets into space. These African-American women were science, technology, engineering and mathematics, commonly known as STEM, pioneers. The human computers were basically unnoticed until a book called *Hidden Figures* was written about their work. Understanding the determination of these women contributes to the growth of young women and minorities, particularly in STEM. Inspire young girls and young women to consider a career in science, technology, engineering and math. It is significant not just to do what you are told, but to also ask questions, or take the task further. Get them used to seeing more women who are focused on a career in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

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