

Name _____

Katherine Johnson: The Mathematician Who Helped NASA Reach Space

Katherine Johnson was a brilliant mathematician who helped astronauts travel safely into space. She worked for NASA, the space agency in the United States, and played a key role in some of the most important space missions in history. Her talent with numbers and her determination helped her break barriers for women and African Americans in science and technology.

Early Life and Love for Math

Katherine Johnson was born on August 26, 1918, in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. From a very young age, she loved numbers and solving problems. She was so good at math that she started high school at just 10 years old! She later attended West Virginia State College, where she studied mathematics and became one of the first African American women to graduate with high honors in her field. Even though Katherine was extremely smart, finding a job in science was not easy for women, especially African American women. But she never gave up on her dreams.

Working at NASA

In 1953, Katherine Johnson started working at NASA, where she was a "computer." Back then, before modern computers, people did all the math calculations by hand. Katherine was one of the best at solving difficult math problems. She worked on many important space missions. One of her most famous contributions was calculating the flight path for John Glenn's orbit around Earth in 1962. At that time, NASA was starting to use electronic computers, but John Glenn did not fully trust them. He asked for Katherine to check the numbers herself before he flew into space. She did, and her calculations were perfect!

Challenges and Achievements

Katherine Johnson worked at a time when there were very few women or African Americans in science. She had to face many challenges, such as unfair rules that separated her from her coworkers. However, she did not let that stop her. She focused on her work and proved that she was one of the best mathematicians at NASA. Her contributions helped send astronauts to the moon in 1969 and made space travel safer. In 2015, at the age of 97, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of the highest honors in the United States.

Legacy and Inspiration

Katherine Johnson's story was featured in the book and movie "Hidden Figures," which tells the story of the African American women who worked at NASA and helped send astronauts into space.

She passed away in 2020 at the age of 101, but her impact lives on. Today, young students, especially girls and African Americans; look up to her as a role model. Her work showed that with determination, intelligence, and courage, anyone can reach for the stars!

