

Doctor Mae Jemison Orbiting the Earth



By Lauren Kratz Prushko

“Six, five, four...” the main engines of the space shuttle Endeavour started with a deafening roar, and the shuttle began to shake and vibrate. “Three, two, one...” the astronauts aboard the Endeavour, resting on their backs with their feet above their heads, were filled with hope and excitement! “Zero, blast off!” The space shuttle Endeavour soared upward with such a great force that Dr. Mae Jemison was pushed back into her seat so she couldn’t move or speak. The space shuttle had the help of two solid rocket boosters that soon fell away after the launch, and the Endeavour went faster and faster towards space!

Mae Jemison has said, “Don’t let anyone rob you of your imagination, your creativity, or your curiosity.” And Mae has lived by her advice from the time she was a little girl born on October 17, 1956, in Decatur, Alabama to right now. Stay curious!

When Mae was a child, she dreamt of going to space. She read every astronomy book she could find. After the Apollo 11 mission to the moon in 1969, Mae read everything she could get her hands on about spaceflight. Mae also read science fiction books, including one of her favorite books, “A Wrinkle in Time.” Stay curious!

When Mae went to high school, she knew she wanted to have a career in science. So when her class went on a field trip to a local college, she discovered biomedical engineering, using science to build technologies that help people when they are sick or hurt. However, Mae knew as a young African-American woman in the 1970s that she would have to create opportunities for herself with very little outside help or support besides her family. Stay curious!

Mae was determined to get hospital experience and research diseases that affected African Americans. So when she had a science fair project in school, she called her local hospital to find out information about sickle cell anemia, a red blood cell disease. The hospital ended up allowing Mae to work there once a week! Stay curious!

In 1973, Mae graduated high school at age sixteen! She stayed determined, applied to many college scholarships, and went to Stanford University for chemical engineering. She had to constantly prove herself and work twice as hard because any career in science was filled with males and not African American women. Mae graduated college at age twenty and attended medical school at Cornell University Medical College to become a doctor! Stay curious!

Dr. Mae Jemison became a doctor in 1982. But even when Mae was a little girl and now an adult, she was passionate about other interests besides science. She studied African-American studies in college, and she learned how to speak Swahili, Japanese, and Russian! Mae studied dance and theater, and she said, “Many people do not see a connection between science and dance, but I consider them both to be expressions of the boundless creativity that people have to share with one another.” Stay curious!

At 26 years old, Dr. Mae Jemison volunteered as a medical officer with the Peace Corps in West Africa. The Peace Corps is run by the United States government and promotes world peace through volunteering around the world. Dr. Jemison said, “I’ve gotten much more out of what I have done than the people I was supposed to be helping.” Stay curious!

When Dr. Mae Jemison returned to the United States, she thought about her dream to go into space and wanted to make that dream happen. As a doctor and going to school for chemical engineering, she now met the basic requirements to apply to NASA’s astronaut training program. But Dr. Jemison didn’t stop there. While working during the day, she took night courses in biomedical engineering to make her application stand out amongst all the applications NASA receives. Stay curious!

All of Dr. Jemison’s hard work paid off! After many tests and interviews, she got accepted to NASA’s training program. Only fifteen astronaut applicants out of two thousand got accepted into the program. And Mae was the first African-American woman ever accepted into the program! Stay curious!

It was 1992, and Dr. Mae Jemison was one of seven astronauts aboard the space shuttle Endeavour. A space shuttle orbits the earth in 90 minutes, going at 17,500 miles per hour. Mae’s dream came true. She was a space traveler orbiting the earth! Stay curious!

Dr. Mae Jemison always stayed true to herself. She used her interests and passions to help achieve her goals. As the first African American woman Mission Specialist to fly into space, Mae conducted experiments on the space shuttle. The experiments included space motion sickness, whether frogs could grow hatched without gravity, and bone cell loss in the space environment. All while being surrounded by an Alvin Ailey dance poster, several art objects from West Africa, and a photo of airplane pilot Bessie Coleman that she brought into space. Stay curious!

Today, Dr. Mae Jemison uses her knowledge to support the environment, the future of space travel, engineering and health devices to help people in different countries, and science-based programs for children worldwide. Dr. Mae Jemison wants everyone to stay curious!