

DEFYING GRAVITY: MAE JEMISON

by Anina Robb

Have you ever wanted to float above the earth? Or maybe defy gravity? Dr. Mae Jemison did, but she couldn't decide how to best achieve this goal. Perhaps she should study science and become an astronaut? Or maybe she should follow her love of dance and become a professional dancer? At first glance, these two dreams seem like they belong at the opposite ends of a wish list, but Mae Jemison followed both her dreams of dancing and becoming an astronaut. She became the first African American woman astronaut and showed the world how dancing and space travel aren't that different. 1

Born October 17, 1956, in Decatur, Alabama, Mae and her family moved to Chicago when she was only three. Mae always considered Chicago her home. As a young girl, Mae imagined "by now we'd be going into space like you were going to work." Her parents were always very supportive of her dreams of studying science—even if her teachers were not always so open-minded. When Mae was five years old, her kindergarten teacher asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. Mae replied, "A scientist!" 2

Her teacher was surprised as there weren't many women scientists in 1961. So her teacher said, "You must mean a nurse?" 3

And Mae remembers thinking that there was nothing wrong with being a nurse, but that was not what she wanted to be. So she said, "No, a scientist!" 4

Mae also loved to dance. As a young girl, she took every kind of dance that she could—ballet, tap, jazz, and African. Most people might think that dance is the exact opposite of science. After all, it is an art. What could dance training possibly offer to becoming a scientist or an astronaut? As Mae put it, "In dance class, I grew stronger and gained an appreciation for hard work, physical strength, and grace." The lessons she learned from dance would eventually serve her very well in her astronaut training. 5

Mae graduated from high school early; she was only 16. At the time she did not realize that this was an achievement. It wasn't until she arrived at the campus of Stanford University in California—far from her Chicago home—that she realized how young she was. Throughout Mae's college years, her interests remained wide and varied—not just science. At Stanford she studied both physical and social sciences. Mae learned Russian and African languages. Her college degrees were in chemical engineering and African studies.

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After college Mae was trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life; she was trying to decide whether to continue on to medical school at Cornell or to become a professional dancer. Like a lot of young adults, she turned to her mother for advice. Her mother told her, "You can always dance if you are a doctor, but you can't doctor if you are a dancer." So Mae put aside her dream of professional dancing and went on to medical school for four years and became a doctor.

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The next stop on Mae's career path was the Peace Corps. She served as a medical officer in the Peace Corps from 1983 to 1985. Her main job was to care for Peace Corps volunteers serving in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Africa. It was during this time that she applied to the astronaut program at NASA. Mae was inspired to follow through on her dream of becoming an astronaut by the African American actress who played Lieutenant Uhura on the TV show *Star Trek*. She also could tell that the space program was opening up to women after the historic flight of the first American woman, Sally Ride, in 1983.

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In 1987, NASA accepted Mae into its Astronaut Training Program. Only 15 candidates were chosen that year out of over 2,000 applicants. She was part of a highly select group of trainees being groomed to fly the next shuttle into space. She trained at their facilities in Texas and in Florida and learned all about space exploration—the hard work and the physical strength needed to be an astronaut. She worked for NASA and waited for a chance to go up on one of the space shuttles.

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Fast Fact

In 2015 NASA received over 18,000 application for its astronaut training program!

In 1992 that chance finally came. The space shuttle *Endeavor* launched September 12, 1992, and Mae Jemison became the first African American woman to orbit the Earth. Mae has happy memories of that flight and looking out the window down onto planet Earth. She looked down at the Earth from the space shuttle and saw the city of Chicago—her childhood home. She said, “I felt like I belonged right there in space. I realized I would be comfortable anywhere in the universe because I belonged to and was part of it as much as any star, planet, asteroid, comet, or nebula.”

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Because of her love of dance and as a salute to creativity, Mae took a poster of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater along with her on her historic space flight. Jemison says, “Many people don’t see the 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.”

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What is it that we can take away from Mae Jemison’s life experiences? It might be to never stop following your passions and dreams because we never know where they might lead us—maybe right out of this world!

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Source: Courtesy of Anina Robb.