

# Mae Jemison

1956–



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** A chemical engineer and doctor, Mae Jemison was the first African American woman to become an astronaut and the first African American woman in space.



*As you read the biography below, think about what it would mean to be the first person from your community to be an astronaut. How has Jemison set an example for others?*



NASA

During the 1980s and 90s, the American space program made advances not only in space travel, technology, and exploration, it also helped advance the ideal of equal opportunities for all U.S. citizens. In 1992 Mae Jemison blasted into space aboard the Space Shuttle *Endeavor* as the first African American woman astronaut and the first to go into space.

The youngest of three children, Mae Jemison was born in 1956 in Decatur, Alabama. Her family moved to Chicago, Illinois, when Jemison was three years old. There, Jemison's uncle introduced her to the world of science. From an early age, Jemison displayed interest in anthropology, archaeology, and astronomy. She graduated from high school early and received a scholarship to Stanford University at age 16. She graduated in 1977 with degrees in chemical engineering and in African and Afro-American studies.

Jemison went on to earn a Ph.D. from Cornell University's medical school in 1981, and she worked for a short time after that as a doctor in Los Angeles. She then practiced medicine as a volunteer in a Cambodian refugee camp and as a medical officer with the Peace Corps in West Africa. From 1983 to 1985, she managed health care for the Peace Corps and for U.S. embassy employees in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

When Jemison returned to the United States, she applied to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to become an astronaut. In 1986 she and 14 other candidates were chosen from a pool of 2,000 applicants. After completing her training in 1988, Jemison helped to prepare space shuttles for launch at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Jemison also worked on the first successful joint United States–Japan space mission. The project focused on conducting experiments in life sciences and in material processing in space.

**A Conservative Era****Biography**

In September 1992 Jemison blasted off into orbit aboard the space shuttle *Endeavour*. She spent more than a week studying the effects of zero gravity on people and animals. Jemison remembered those who inspired her with a poster she brought along with her into space: It showed dancer and choreographer Judith Jamison, who has created and performed in many dance works honoring the lives of African American women.

After returning from space, Jemison began to think about how space technology might be used to help developing countries. In 1993 she resigned from NASA and established the Jemison Group, which focuses on advanced technology. She also teaches at Dartmouth College. Jemison continues to encourage all people, especially women and members of other minority groups, to pursue careers in science.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. **Recall** What did Jemison do before she became an astronaut?

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2. **Make Inferences** As the first African American woman in space, how has Jemison been a role model to others?

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**ACTIVITY**

Many people apply to NASA to become astronauts. Only a few are chosen. Sometimes applications include an essay question. Write a short essay presenting Mae Jemison's qualifications and trying to persuade NASA that she would be a good astronaut.