

Space Conquest: New role models – TEXT E ,

Shelia Nash-Stevenson is an aerospace engineer. When she received her doctorate in physics from Alabama A&M University in 1994, she became the first African-American woman to get a physics **PhD** in her state. Even before she got that degree, she worked as an electronics engineer at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alama. Today, she serves as a project manager for a space mission involving the United States and Brazil.

Before *Hidden Figures*, Nash-Stevenson had never heard about the female “computers” portrayed in the movie. But she's grateful to them for paving the way for her — and also for what they stand for. “Every young girl needs to see this movie because it's a positive image of females,” she says. “It's not about outside appearance. It's about what you've got in your head. Young girls can see the work these women did and be inspired.” Nash-Stevenson just wishes she had role models like them when she was growing up.

Back then, she says, “I didn't know that anything I do now was possible for females — that it was okay to be different and that girls can do everything. There were so many possibilities I could have taken advantage of that I didn't know about.”

Nash-Stevenson grew up in rural Hillsboro, Alabama. As a child, she sometimes worked **weeding** cotton, earning \$5 a day. Early on, she knew she didn't want to spend the rest of her life in the cotton fields. So she focused on school. She loved math and science. She studied electronics engineering in college and eventually pursued a master's degree in physics. Then, over a 10-year **span** — all the while working full time and raising two children — she earned her PhD.

Her determination paid off in a job she loves. That's why she encourages students to take STEM classes. “They're not as hard as they appear to be,” she says. “And they open up so many opportunities.” Some schools offer engineering academies. “I wish they had that when I was growing up.”

Morehouse, a historically black college offers a New Math Program. It brings middle-school and young high-school students to the campus in summer. Even though Morehouse is a college for African-American men, its New Math Program is open to anyone.

NASA, too, offers many programs, including internships, to get students involved in STEM. For instance, it sponsors science projects such as the Team America Rocketry Challenge. And NASA's website offers a lot of STEM-based materials targeted from young kids to older teens.

Indeed, Nash-Stevenson recommends, teens today should take all the math and science they can. “Once you get started,” she says, “you'll realize that it's not difficult to make it in those fields. Even if you choose another route, you will at least have the background. And more options will be available to you.”

Correction: Glenn was not the first man to orbit Earth. Soviet Yuri Gagarin preceded him by nearly a year.

Gerri Miller, [Meet the people behind the film Hidden Figures](#) *Science News Explores*, August 24, 2017

PhD : *High Academic Degree*

weeding : *ici, ramasser-* **span** : *ici, période s'établissant sur*