

## Meet the people behind the film Hidden Figures : Bill Barry – TEXT D

In February 1962, astronaut John Glenn made history as the first American to orbit Earth. Few people today are **aware** of how uncertain it was as to whether he'd make it home. Or they weren't until the movie Hidden Figures recounted the story. But the movie isn't really about Glenn. The real heroes of the film are the female African-American mathematicians who worked behind the scenes — as human “computers” — to make sure the critical numbers added up for plotting Glenn's safe return.

The 2016 movie was based on Margot Lee Shetterly's book of the same name. The film focuses on three women in the 1960s who worked at NASA's Langley Research Center. Opportunities at the space agency for women and for people of color, back then, did not match those for white men. But Katherine Johnson, and her colleagues Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson were still able to perform important work. And now they're finally getting the widespread respect and visibility that their achievements deserved. Bringing accuracy to this uplifting story on the big screen would not have been possible without the help of experts in math and in NASA's history. These experts worked closely with Hollywood filmmakers to ensure everything was correct.

Bill Barry has loved outer space since he was four years old. In 2001, he joined NASA, and for the past seven years has served as the space agency's chief historian, based in Washington, D.C. His main job was to **review** the script and point out inaccuracies or lines that a NASA person would never say. He was brought in after the script was written. Still, he notes, the filmmakers were willing to revise the script “to reflect things that should or shouldn't be in it.” For instance, he **nixed** the idea of Pentagon **bigwigs** watching a Russian space launch in real time. That couldn't have happened back then.

But the filmmakers did not always **heed** his advice. “There's a scene where Mary Jackson [played by Janelle Monáe] walks through the wind tunnel,” he notes. Along the way, she gets one of her high heels stuck. “People don't walk through a wind tunnel at NASA,” Barry told them. But Ted Melfi chose to keep this scene anyway. He liked its dramatic touch.

Some events are depicted on screen as happening at times other than when they actually occurred. The film took a few liberties when depicting civil rights changes at Langley. “The movie compresses them into 1960 to 1962,” Barry says, when in fact, they happened over a far longer period. Today, 17,000 people work at NASA headquarters and 10 field centers around the country. About one-third of them are women. And roughly one in every five of those women are African-American. “We're trying to improve those numbers,” Barry admits. NASA, he says, would “like to see a more diverse workforce.”

He thinks Hidden Figures can help on that score. “One reason NASA wanted to engage with the movie is we saw it as a way to get the message to young people about the value of a STEM education.” The movie “has such a clear message that there are role models out there that you can follow. We hope that people see the diversity of people working at NASA and think, ‘I can work there too.’ I'm positive that we'll reap the benefits for a long time. .”

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

**aware:** *avoir conscience*

**review** : check - **nixed:** *ici, empêcher* - **bigwigs:** *important person*

**heed** : *follow*