

Katherine Johnson, 1918 – 2020

What Katherine did: Falling in love with maths from a young age, Katherine studied the subject alongside French at university, graduating summa cum laude at the age of just 18! She joined NASA in 1953 and her contributions in orbital mechanics were crucial to the success of the USA's aeronautics and space programmes. In 2015, she was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama for her important work as a mathematician, physicist and space scientist as a woman of colour.

Katherine's impact: Despite being one of the first three black women to attend West Virginia University, she dared to challenge the stereotypes which existed around her and has since become a pioneering example and role model for females everywhere of African American women in STEM.

She was responsible for calculating the trajectory for Project Mercury and the Apollo 11 flight to the moon, which means she helped the first spaceship and the first Americans reach the moon! Believing that “everything is physics and math(s)”, she encouraged girls to pursue careers in STEM and often gave talks on the subject.

“Girls are capable of doing everything men are capable of doing.”

