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Astronaut credits programs with helping her soar

By Natalie O'Toole



Ope Oladipo/University Photography

Mae Jemison chats with students at the McNair scholars program induction ceremony April 12.

Decades ago, NASA rejected many underrepresented astronaut hopefuls each year. After anti-discrimination laws passed, minorities and women still felt deterred from the application process. Nichelle Nichols, a black actress in the original "Star Trek" TV series, on her own time recruited highly qualified, marginalized individuals, telling NASA that she would let the world know if they refused to choose them.

"So that's a place at the table," said Mae Jemison, M.D. '81, the first woman of color in space, discussing Nichols' influence.

Jemison spoke at the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program induction ceremony at Cornell April 12 about her journey as a scholar, physician and astronaut, and those who helped her attain her lifelong dream of space travel. The program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, prepares students from disadvantaged backgrounds for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities.

Jemison said Ron McNair, the program's namesake, was an underrepresented hopeful recruited by Nichols. McNair, the second African-American in space, took time to speak to Jemison about his journey

before she became an astronaut. After his death in the Challenger accident, the McNair Program was developed to improve the diversity and quality of students pursuing Ph.Ds.

“The purpose of the Ron McNair program is to build scholars,” said Jemison. “It’s to give more people a place at the table.”

Discussing her unorthodox career as a public school student in Chicago, chemical engineering student and Peace Corps member, Jemison said diversity is imperative in academic pursuits because it gives rise to different perspectives. She gave the example of mastectomies being the breast cancer treatment of choice before female physicians were common. Soon, newer and better technologies were developed as the job force changed.

Like those female physicians, Jemison knows the difficulties of being a pioneer and why programs like McNair are important: “A Yoruba proverb says, ‘Even the sharpest blade can’t cut its own handle.’ I was a very bright little girl, but I wouldn’t have been here without a lot of help. And that help didn’t just come from my schoolteachers. It didn’t just come from my mother and father. It came from other programs. ... These programs make a difference.”

Jemison also discussed the challenges of her current project, 100 Year Starship, an ambitious plan to ensure human interstellar space travel in the next 100 years. Our nearest star system is 4.2 light years away – a possible 50-year journey – meaning technology must change drastically. “The scale of what we have to do is tremendous, because it’s really the distance, the constraints of resources, the unknown that makes this a problem that’s worth the challenge.”

Quoting French psychiatrist, philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, Jemison noted, “He said, ‘Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.’ And right now the United States is the most prosperous nation in the entire history of this world. ... It’s moments such as this where we have the opportunity to decide what we’re going to do.”

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