



Community News

Alpha Academy dedicates Institute at ceremony

by J. McKrae * Photo by JJ Jones

Cumberland County's only charter school dedicated its new Katherine G. Johnson S.T.E.M. Institute in a ceremony held Thursday, March 29 at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum.

The Alpha Academy now sits on six-acres near the border of Cumberland and Hoke counties. The school also has a new S.T.E.M. Institute—Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. It was named to honor Katherine Johnson, a pioneering mathematician.

Johnson was NASA's first black female research mathematician and physicist. "The new institute will help challenge students to excel," said Eugene Slocum, Alpha's executive director.

Alpha Academy, founded in 2000, relocated to the 8000 block of Raeford Road from Morganton Rd. Slocum said he hopes a 20,000-square-foot classroom building and a 10,000-square-foot multipurpose building will be completed for the start of the new school year in August.

Institute named

Honoree Katherine Johnson, 93 yrs old, once designed star charts for astronauts to learn as a back-up navigation system in case their computers failed.

One of her responsibilities at NASA was to help guide astronauts throughout the early years of manned space flights including the first space mission to the moon. Johnson calculated the routes for the country's first moon walker Neil Armstrong and other astronauts.

Lived to learn

Johnson, a West Virginia native and the youngest of four children, was born in 1918. Her family settled in Institute, W.Va. It was one of the few areas offering high school classes to black people. Her father knew the significance of a good education, although he was a sixth



grade dropout. She was only 14 years old when she graduated. She went on to earn a bachelor's degree at 18 years old during the Great Depression.

Following college, she taught in Virginia and West Virginia schools. Not long after she was married, Johnson started graduate classes in 1940. However, following her husband's illness, she taught his classes in the public schools to provide for her family.

In the 1950s, Johnson learned that the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics at Langley Research Center - NASA's predecessor agency - was looking to hire black women mathematicians; she was hired in 1953.

Johnson used plane analytic geometry and algebraic equations to make the space flight maps used by astronauts. "It was a real challenge to do the Apollo missions to the moon." According to her daughter Connie Garcia, most of Johnson's work was done in secret.

Locally, Katherine Johnson is strongly supported by Joe and Linda Rivera, owners of the Greek Shop in the US Flea Market on McPherson Church Rd, in Fayetteville. Their son Larry met Johnson a few years ago. During the dedication ceremony, Alpha students performed songs and a skit about Johnson's life. A great future innovator could easily have been among the students at the ceremony. That was acknowledged by Christine Mann Darden, an international expert in sonic boom and supersonic technology who once worked with Johnson at NASA.

It was clear that Katherine Johnson was genuinely elated to have the S.T.E.M. Institute named in her honor. "Students, I encourage you to keep on dreaming. I am utterly speechless with thanks and appreciation."

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