

Important African American Figures

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Ava DuVernay, Director and Activist

by Caitlyn Meagher



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Ava DuVernay

Do you enjoy movies that make you laugh *and* cry? Ava DuVernay directs movies that cause audiences to experience a range of emotions. She is a world renowned African-American director who believes it is important for her movies to cause a strong reaction in viewers.

Ava DuVernay was inspired to go into the arts at a young age by her aunt, Denise. Denise was a nurse who worked the night shift so she could pursue her artistic passions during the day. Over time, DuVernay saw that she could make her own statement through film. She began creating documentaries that showed the issues and triumphs of the communities around her. She then moved into directing and writing her own films, winning many awards at film festivals around the nation.

In many of her films, Ava DuVernay makes art about many parts of the black experience. One of her goals is to combine activism and art. A major film of hers, *Selma*, focuses on a march by protestors fighting for voting rights protections during the Civil Rights Movement. She earned a Golden Globe nomination for best director for this film. She was the first black woman to be nominated for this award.

In 2016, Disney announced that Ava DuVernay would direct *A Wrinkle in Time*. She was the first woman of color to direct a live-action film with a budget of over \$100 million.

Currently, Ava DuVernay is working on her television show, *Queen Sugar*. One of her philosophies is to hire a diverse cast and crew to give many people a range of opportunities. She believes in offering opportunities to talented female directors. This is the first television series in which female directors direct every episode.

DuVernay's confidence and drive define a lot of her work. She says, "I choose what I do. Anything that I'm embracing is something that I'm involved in from the ground up. I do love everything that I'm doing, and I love the stories that I'm telling."

Alexa Canady, Breaking Barriers in Medicine

by Caitlyn Meagher



Alexa Canady, the first African American woman neurosurgeon in the United States

Have you ever wanted to become a doctor? If so, you may want to follow Alexa Canady's path. Alexa Canady was the first female African American neurosurgeon in the United States!

Canady was born on November 7, 1950. At a young age, her parents taught her the importance of hard work and perseverance. This life lesson stayed with her throughout her schooling and career.

Canady went to the University of Michigan and studied zoology. During her junior year of college, she did a summer program that inspired her to become a doctor of some kind. After college, she went to medical school. After graduating from medical school, Canady had some trouble getting an internship. But eventually, she ended up as a surgery intern at Yale-New Haven Hospital. After her internship, she went on to do her residency in Minnesota.

Residency is a part of a doctor's training, where the doctors-in-training learn on the job. Canady quickly became one of the top residents of her class! Then, she moved on to be a proper neurosurgeon, with a focus on helping sick kids.

Neurosurgery is a kind of surgery that is performed on the nervous system, which includes the brain and the spinal cord. Neurosurgeons must be extremely skilled and talented to succeed in this difficult profession. Alexa Canady rose to every challenge. Many of her patients were under the age of 10. They had serious brain injuries or diseases. Throughout her over 20-year career, Canady saved thousands of young lives.

Canady's approach to medicine was to focus on the patients. She wanted to create a strong relationship with her patients so they felt that they could speak freely about their pain and other concerns. She built trust with her patients. This skill of hers did not go unnoticed. In 1987, she became the director of neurosurgery at the Children's Hospital of Michigan. With her guidance, people viewed her department as one of the best in the country. Although she did experience discrimination during her time as a neurosurgeon, she continued to push past the barriers in the medical profession. She has said, "The greatest challenge I faced in becoming a neurosurgeon was believing it was possible." Her hard work and dedication paid off.

Alexa Canady received many awards for her work in neurology. She was inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in 1989. And in 1993, she received the American Medical Women's Association President's Award. Even in retirement, Canady works part-time at a hospital, helping other children in need.

A Hidden Figure of the Space Race: Katherine G. Johnson

by Caitlyn Meagher

Have you heard of Katherine G. Johnson? If you haven't heard of her, it may be because she's one of the "hidden figures" behind NASA's work to send people into space. But she's definitely worth knowing about! She achieved countless breakthroughs throughout her impressive career in math and science.

Johnson was born on August 26, 1918. At the young age of 13, she already showed an incredible talent for math. She was way ahead of her classmates and graduated with highest honors from West Virginia State College. She began teaching at a black public school in Virginia.

As a black woman growing up in the South, Katherine G. Johnson faced a lot of discrimination. She was one of three black students to integrate into the all-white graduate schools in West Virginia. She enrolled in the graduate math program, but stopped her studies to start a family. She went back to teaching, not realizing that her career path would shift drastically.

In 1952, a relative told her about an open job in the all-black West Area Computing section at the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics' (NACA's) Langley laboratory. This laboratory was responsible for working on new flight technology, including space travel. NACA would later become part of NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). She got the job and spent four years analyzing data about a plane crash while learning the ins and outs of the mathematics of flying.

In 1957, the Soviet Union launched a satellite called Sputnik 1 into Earth's orbit. This was the first satellite to be sent into space. The Space Race was on! The United States began funding NASA to compete with the Soviet Union. The United States wanted to be the first country to have a successful human space flight. Katherine G. Johnson contributed greatly to this effort.



NASA; restored by Adam Cuerden [Public Domain]

Katherine Johnson, working as a physicist at NASA

She wrote research papers that laid out many of the mathematical equations necessary for space travel.



NASA [Public Domain]

Katherine Johnson being awarded a Presidential Medal

Katherine G. Johnson is probably most known for her work on the orbital mission of John Glenn. He was set to be the first American to orbit around the Earth. But he did not trust all of the electronic machines that would control the path of his spaceship. These machines would sometimes malfunction. Glenn asked the engineers for Katherine G. Johnson's help. He trusted her to check every single mathematical equation. She checked the numbers, and Glenn's mission was a success! Now, there is a movie called *Hidden Figures* that tells the true story of how she and two other brilliant African American women made sure this mission was a triumph.

33 years of work and many research papers later, Johnson retired in 1986. She said, "I loved going to work every single day." At the age of 97, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her important work at NASA.

Ed Dwight: The First African American Astronaut Trainee

by Caitlyn Meagher



United States Air Force [Public domain]

Edward J. Dwight Jr. while serving as a Captain in the US Air Force

Do you dream of becoming an astronaut when you grow up? Ever since he was little, Ed Dwight dreamed of flying in the air. He became the first African American to be trained as an astronaut.

Ed Dwight was born on September 9, 1933. He joined the United States Air Force in 1953 to pursue his dream of becoming a pilot. He earned his engineering degree from Arizona State University. Then, President John F. Kennedy's administration selected him out of many people to train as the first-ever African American astronaut. He instantly became a household name; everyone knew who Ed Dwight was! His face was on many magazines around the world.

Ed Dwight did not have an easy path to becoming an astronaut. Unfortunately, he faced a lot of racial discrimination while training as an astronaut. Some news broadcasters and politicians questioned his intelligence. Even people in the Air Force and NASA, the agency in charge of choosing astronauts, questioned him on the basis of race. Their ignorance affected Ed Dwight, but he continued to work toward his goal. During his training, he worked with cutting-edge technology. He went through numerous tests and flew experimental aircraft carriers. He watched as NASA chose astronauts from the Air Force, leaving him out, but he kept training.

Then, in 1963, John F. Kennedy was killed. Dwight felt he had lost a role model, and someone who had been rooting for him. Dwight soon left the Air Force. He never made it to space. But he did not let that disappointment stop him from pushing forward in life. He started businesses of his own and became incredibly successful.

Ed Dwight's dream changed after leaving the Air Force. He had always loved making art. He began sculpting and has now made over 18,000 sculptures. Many of them are of important African American figures from history. Many of his sculptures are now on public display throughout the United States.

Ed Dwight broke many barriers throughout his life. He had many talents in both the arts and engineering. His life took many twists, and he did not always succeed, but he always tried again. And in the end, he found a way to pursue his passions.



IMS Vintage Photos [Public domain]

Sculptor and former test pilot Edward Joseph Dwight, Jr., who was the first African American to be trained as an astronaut.

Reginald Lewis: Businessman Extraordinaire

by Caitlyn Meagher

Reginald Lewis was an African American businessman and philanthropist. He worked incredibly hard to achieve his goals, and became very successful because of his hard work, good sense, and some good luck.

Reginald Lewis was born on December 7, 1942 in East Baltimore, Maryland. His parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts all believed in his potential. He worked hard to live up to their beliefs. During high school, he went above and beyond in everything he did. He became captain of the football, baseball and basketball teams. He also focused on academics throughout his school career. In high school, he even wrote in his journal, "To be a good lawyer, one must study HARD." He knew that it would take a lot of work to achieve all he wanted in life, and wasn't afraid to put in that work!

Lewis's hard work eventually led him to Harvard Law School. After graduating, Lewis landed a job at an important New York law firm. A few years later, he founded a new law firm - the first African American law firm in New York. They specialized in investing money into businesses they believed could be successful. Many of those businesses were owned by minorities.

Eventually, Lewis created his own investment firm, called TLC Group. At one point, his firm bought a failing company called McCall Pattern Company. Lewis transformed that company and figured out how to make it a success. In the summer of 1987, he sold the company for \$65 million! Only a couple of months later, he made a huge deal that made him a record-breaker. He bought a business that ended up making almost 2 billion dollars a year! It was the first black-owned business to make over a billion dollars in a single year. That meant his business was the largest company in the country that was led by an African-American person. At that time, he was one of the wealthiest men in America, and the richest African-American man.

Throughout his successful career, Reginald Lewis found ways to give back to society. He supported the Civil Rights Movement and was an activist for many important causes. David N. Dinkins, the former mayor of New York, said, "Reginald Lewis accomplished more in half a century than most of us could ever deem imaginable. And his brilliant career was matched always by a warm and generous heart." Lewis donated money to universities, churches, and homeless shelters. And importantly, he opened doors for many people of color. His legacy paved the way for many other successful African American business people. Ken Chenault, the CEO of American Express, said, "There is no doubt that Reginald Lewis' success paved the way for me, and many others, and I think that really is the test in demonstration of real leadership."

Sammy Davis Jr., an Exceptional Entertainer

by Caitlyn Meagher



Jay Bernstein Public Relations [Public domain]

Sammy Davis Jr.

Have you heard of a man named Sammy Davis Jr.? Sammy Davis Jr. overcame racism and bigotry to become one of the biggest entertainers in the world! Many people consider Sammy Davis Jr. to be one of the most legendary performers of the 20th century.

Davis was born on December 8, 1925 in New York City. At a young age, he went on the road with his father and uncle, who were entertainers. Sammy Davis Jr. learned to tap dance and started performing with them. He learned to play multiple instruments and became a skilled singer, dancer and comedian. His talent was unmatched by many. He quickly became the star of the show!

In 1943, Davis's budding entertainment career was interrupted. He was drafted into the Army to fight in World War II. While in the Army, he experienced prejudice and even physical abuse

from his fellow soldiers. He realized one way to protect himself from this form of hatred was to entertain. By being an entertainer in the army, he felt somewhat safer.

After the war ended, Davis picked up his performing career. He performed at nightclubs and started recording his own records. In 1947, his career reached new heights when he opened for Frank Sinatra, a well-known entertainer. They would remain close friends throughout their lives.



Dell Publishing [Public domain]

The Rat Pack with Sammy Davis Jr.

Sammy Davis Jr. was a star who had successful records and appeared in multiple television shows and films. He was also an important member of the Rat Pack, a group of famous entertainers which included Sinatra. Davis even took his talents to the stage and performed on Broadway in *Mr. Wonderful* and *Golden Boy*. But despite all this, Davis still experienced constant racial discrimination. Rather than quietly deal with it, he was outspoken about discrimination and acted on his beliefs. During the 1960s, he participated in the March on Washington and spoke out against racial prejudice. He refused to perform at segregated nightclubs. Many people saw his refusal to perform in these venues as the reason that Miami and Las Vegas nightclubs became desegregated. He also challenged biases by marrying Swedish actress May Britt, who was white. At the time, interracial marriage was illegal in 31 states. His legacy includes speaking out against racial prejudice and not letting racism get in the way of achieving his goals.

Davis continued sharing his many talents past the '60s. In 1972, he produced his most successful hit record, "The Candy Man." It was number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. Before his death in 1990, he went on a final tour with Frank Sinatra and Liza Minelli, two legends in their own right. His legacy continues to live on through his many records, films, and biographies.