

THE DISTAFF STUFF

As a child during the Mercury and Gemini Space Programs, with stars in my eyes from the works of Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein and from watching episodes of *Star Trek*, I would have told you that I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up. This was a bit of wishful thinking that I shared with my father. In his youth, he had desperately wanted to be a fighter pilot, but myopia put that dream forever out of his reach. In the earliest days of the space program, President Eisenhower determined that astronaut candidates had to be military test pilots. They also had to be in superb physical shape, hold college degrees, and possess “genius-level” IQs. My dad had a college degree, though, perhaps not in the right subjects, but even if his vision had been perfect, I’m not sure how well he would have met the other qualifications.

I share my father’s nearsightedness, and no one has ever accused me of being either perfectly fit or a genius. Unlike my dad, I was also missing the seemingly essential Y chromosome. The United States Naval and Air Force Academies did not accept women until after my freshman year at college. Trust me, even if I’d been a couple of years younger, I would not have possessed the “right stuff” needed for entrance into either of those esteemed institutions. A career in space seemed so utterly unobtainable that it never became a serious adult objective. That was fine with me because my early love of science fiction led me to the perfect career, but I have always remained in awe of the people who really do the daring job that SF writers only make up stories about.

Fortunately, there were brave and intelligent (and exceptionally physically fit) young women, some of them almost exactly my age, who were not put off by the space program’s initial insistence on male-only astronauts. By the mid-sixties, NASA had stopped insisting that all as-

tronauts had to have previous military flight experience. Once the space agency began looking for chemical engineers, medical doctors, astrophysicists, and computer scientists, it was only a matter of time before America’s astronaut corps became a diverse body of men and women.

There were at least three women born within a few weeks of me who did not let a silly thing like the closed doors of a military academy stop them from making their dreams reality. The youngest of these women (by a month), Eileen Marie Collins, actually was a test pilot. She was born in Elmira, New York, the same town where I attended college. After graduating from Syracuse University, she received pilot training at Vance Air Force Base in Oklahoma. She eventually became an assistant professor of mathematics and a flight instructor at the USAF Academy before being selected for astronaut training in 1990. Colonel Collins, now retired, became the first female shuttle pilot in 1995 and the first female commander in 1999.

Born less than a month after me, Mae Carol Jemison, the first woman of color in space, never let her dreams be deterred by NASA’s early preference for white male candidates. Mae Jemison entered Stanford at sixteen and earned a degree in chemical engineering. Later, she received a doctor of medicine from Cornell. Dr. Jemison read science fiction growing up. A career in space seemed imaginable because of role models like Nichelle Nichols—*Star Trek’s* Lt. Uhura. According to the *New York Times*, Dr. Jemison, together with Icarus Interstellar—a nonprofit foundation—recently won a \$500,000 government grant “to set up 100 Year Starship, an organization that is to come up with a business plan for interstellar travel.”

When I began researching this editori-

al, I had a fantasy that Janice E. Voss and I could have been classmates. Our birthdays were less than two weeks apart and we'd both spent our high school years in Western Massachusetts. When my parents decided to leave rural Holland, Mass., for a Springfield suburb, they were torn between two towns—Wilbraham and Longmeadow. Eventually, they decided on Longmeadow. Dr. Voss was born in South Bend, Indiana, but her family eventually moved to Wilbraham. I was about to bemoan my parents' poor judgment when I realized that, like Mae Jemison, Janice Voss was out of high school by the time I was a junior. In addition to a host of other degrees, she received a Ph.D. in aeronautics/astronautics from MIT in 1987. Dr. Voss took her first journey into space in 1993 and shortly after that she sent a letter to *Asimov's*. She let us know about how much her love for science fiction had inspired her and she enclosed a photograph of herself reading *Foundation* by Earthlight on the *Endeavor*. Isaac Asimov had died a few months earlier, but I know that he would have been profoundly moved by her acknowledgment of his influence on her career. Janice Voss flew on four more shuttle missions and later became the science director for NASA's Kepler Space Observatory.

I was heartbroken to learn of the death of Dr. Voss from cancer last February. Little did I know that she would be the first of three astronauts to pass away in 2012. The lives of the others, Neil Armstrong and Sally Ride, touched me in no small way, and I will reflect upon those two giants in another editorial. Still, Janice Voss was the only astronaut in that trio with whom I had had personal contact. While we never shared the same career trajectory, reading the works of Isaac Asimov and other SF authors had a huge impact on both of our lives. That link to Dr. Voss makes me stop and wonder about the inspirational effect some of today's writers must be having at this very moment on the astronauts, scientists, and, even, editors of tomorrow.