

Hidden Figures: The Katherine Johnson Story

By Rev. Deborah Coble

How you experience a movie can vary greatly depending on who you watch it with. I had the privilege of watching the movie, *Hidden Figures* with two ladies who grew up in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, the hometown of Katherine Coleman Goble Johnson, the main character in the film. The movie is set in the era of Project Mercury, the first human spaceflight program of the United States; John F. Kennedy; the Cold War; and Martin Luther King, Jr. — a season in our country's history that was ripe with possibility but also rife with tension.

I met Sara Carter and Carolyn Bond, members of St. James United Methodist Church, in the lobby of the historic Lewis Theater in downtown Lewisburg, four days before *Hidden Figures* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. We were joined by Rev. Shari Stilgenbauer, pastor of St. James, Eakle Chapel and Emmanuel United Methodist Churches in White Sulphur Springs and Shari's husband, Rev. David Stilgenbauer, pastor of Ronceverte UMC.

To West Virginians the film, which chronicles the contributions of African-American women to the NASA space program as mathematicians, or human computers, is already a winner. Three times during the screening applause broke out, a fitting tribute to a film that reminds us that many heroic lives go unnoticed.

After the film, as we shared impressions of the movie and a late supper at a local restaurant, I was

fascinated when Sara and Carolyn reminisced about the days they knew Miss Katherine as a friend and neighbor.

Right from the start Sara and Carolyn wanted to set the record straight. "I have no idea where they filmed that first part of the movie. That didn't look like White Sulphur Springs," and Miss Katherine grew up in town, just down from the church," they shared. "But she definitely was known for counting

her steps [as depicted in the opening of the film]. She knew exactly how many steps it was from her house down Church Street to St. James Methodist church," Carolyn said.

The Coleman family is remembered by the African-American community of White Sulphur Springs as a nice family. "They were calm, sweet people. Miss Katherine went away to school as did her sister, Miss Margaret. Miss Margaret came back to teach school. Miss Margaret also played piano in our church." Later, when Katherine and her girls would visit her mom during the summer, she attended worship

at St. James and visited with friends and neighbors. "I had no idea she did all of those things [depicted in the movie]. She never said anything about working with the space program," Carolyn said, "but she did always ask us how we were doing in school."

Education was very important to the Coleman family. Katherine and Margaret's parents made sacrifices so their girls could go to Charleston to complete high school.



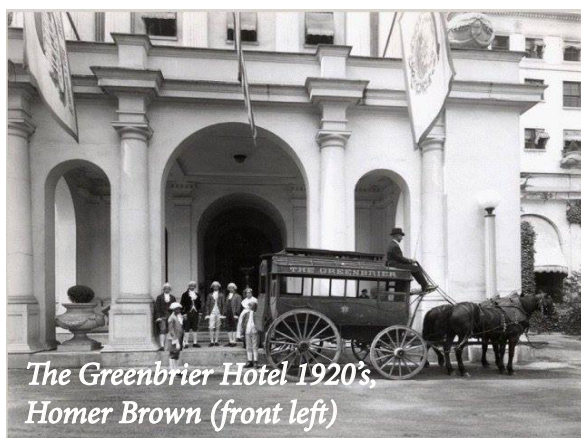
“Mr. Coleman worked at the Greenbrier Resort and as a custodian at the library so that Katherine could go away to high school.” She graduated from high school at the age of 14 and from West Virginia State University with a degree in math at the age of 18. Later on, she graduated from West Virginia University with a master’s degree. She went on to calculate the analytic geometry for the trajectory and re-entry for Alan Shepherd’s historic first flight to space, John Glenn’s orbit of earth and the Apollo and Space Shuttle projects.

Katherine Johnson’s contributions were relatively unheralded until November when, at the age of 96, she was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama. A book about the African-American women of the

space program and the film, *Hidden Figures*, soon followed. Now she’s getting recognition back home. Carolyn explained: “I heard that White Sulphur

Springs is going to rename the public library for Katharine Johnson.” “And put a sign up along the highway,” Sara chimed in. “White Sulphur Springs has never named anything for a black person,” Sara added.

In the mid 1920’s, when Katherine Campbell was a child, most African-American children finished their education after 8th grade and went on to work. A contemporary of Miss Katherine, Homer Brown, Carolyn’s father, went to work at the age of 11 or 12 at The Greenbrier Hotel as a page. Later, as a teenager, he switched to the night shift so that he could work toward his high school diploma. He graduated from high school when he was 23 years old and worked at the Greenbrier until he was in his 70’s.



By 1954 many communities in West Virginia were integrated. But this was not the case in White Sulphur Springs. This article by Harry W. Ernest, staff writer for *The Gazette* is dated September 19, 1954, tells the story of integration in the Greenbrier County schools: <http://www.wvculture.org/history/africanamericans/schoolintegration004.html>

Protests delayed integration in Greenbrier County. At White Sulphur Springs High School, crudely-painted signs read: “No Negroes Wanted in Our Schools.”

Some 300 of 440 White Sulphur students struck on Monday. Negro children were threatened with bodily harm if they returned to “white” classrooms. So Greenbrier’s Board of Education called off partial integration and ordered all students back to the schools they attended last year.

Supt. Trent refused to interfere. “. . . At the present time boards of education are free to act,” he said. “I shall take no action.”

Carolyn was a young child at the time, but vividly remembers the protests. “I was told by my daddy to stay away from downtown. I remember riding my little tricycle that direction, so that

I could visit a local police officer who worked on the bridge, he always had candy for the children. But I remember seeing the angry faces down that way, and I just couldn’t understand why they would be so angry.” Years later she’d see faces that she remembered and ask her father why they were so angry.



Deloris Mattox, Colonel James Johnson, Joylette Johnson, and Katherine Johnson enjoying fellowship at St. James UMC.

Sara, a generation older than Carolyn, worked at the Greenbrier as a parlor maid. She remembers the outrageous costume they were required to wear: “we were dressed up like Aunt Jemima, complete with the big hoop earrings, red handkerchief over our hair and hoop dresses and apron. Finally, a group of us got tired of wearing the getup so we went to human resources, and we asked if we could stop. They agreed to let us wear something more modern.” “I have no complaints about The Greenbrier because they gave a lot of people a job and the ability to buy a home,” Sara went on to say.

Carolyn went on to graduate from high school in an integrated White Sulphur Springs and on to college. She worked her entire career as a speech therapist at a local elementary school. While the unrest over integration is now history, it took a toll on the community: “Our grown children all live elsewhere now.”

Set in Virginia, *Hidden Figures* doesn't shy away from the issues that our country was wrestling with in the segregated south. A second round of applause from the audience during the film occurred when Al Harrison, a character representing an engineer and director of the Space Task Force, played by Kevin Costner, removed the Colored Ladies Rest Room sign. “We've come a long

way. I'm so glad my children didn't have to go through what we had to go through,” Carolyn shared. She then added almost off handedly; “I don't know that we ever had a restaurant we could go to – not when I was growing up in White Sulphur Springs.”

“I don't think it's all settled and done,” Pastor David Stilgenbauer reflected as our time together was drawing to a close. “I wonder how many people think it's all over and done with?” Sara injected; “I'm glad they made the movie, there are ones who don't know what we went through. I told my daughter to go see it.”

Shari Stilgenbauer, pastor of St. James United Methodist Church, spoke for us all when she said; “it was an honor to watch the movie highlighting Miss Katherine's accomplishments with Carolyn and Sara, two of our church members who knew her and attended church with her family.” Pastor Shari added; “the movie opened my eyes to the importance of the stories that are shared by the church and our communities.”

Hidden Figures is based on a book by the same name which is based on the true story of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn and Mary Jackson. All three of the women were brilliant mathematicians and scientists who paved the way for women today. The film was produced by Pharrell Williams, who also wrote the soundtrack. His interest in making the film was to tell what he calls “sticky stories.” Williams shared in a January 13th *Billboard Magazine* article: “A lot of people walk away [from the film] saying, ‘I can't believe I didn't know that story. That should be part of textbook history.’ To us, that's the special sauce right there.”

<http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/7655221/pharrell-williams-hidden-figures-interview>



Movies such as *Hidden Figures*, *Selma*, *The Butler*, *The Help*, and others allow opportunities for meaningful dialogue with one another. We are blessed to have 16 traditionally African-American churches across the Annual Conference. As we move through 2017 it is our hope that United Methodists across West Virginia will seek people who have had different life experiences to share a cup of coffee or a meal and especially watch a movie such as *Hidden Figures* together and then talk about it. We have included some guidelines for thoughtful conversations and listening on pages 32-33.

In the meanwhile, run — don't walk — to your local theater to see *Hidden Figures*. As West Virginians, we have much to be proud of. Miss Katherine Coleman Goble Johnson is one heroine who is finally receiving her due. That we can also claim her as someone whose first faith home was the United Methodist Church is surely 'special sauce.'

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The Importance of Story

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While Black History Month becomes an opportunity to celebrate African-American Heritage, it risks becoming nothing more than tokenism if the stories and struggles of people of this heritage are not part of the common story. Using stories, hymns, quotes, and so on from the Black Experience throughout the year gives the congregation a fuller appreciation for a people with a rich heritage and helps to break down racial barriers.” (Bishop Dr. Tracy Smith Malone, East Ohio Conference)

To this end, we offer the histories and photos of our West Virginia Conference traditionally African American churches on the following pages. We encourage you to reach out to our sister congregations; worship together, share fellowship with one another and learn each other's stories. This is the way that truly leads to peace and understanding.

To read more of Bishop Malone's thoughts about Black History Month visit: www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/truth-by-heart