

Woman honored for NASA work

» BY JAYA PATIL
For InsideNoVa

Dr. Christyl Johnson of Woodbridge has spent nearly 40 years exploring space – from Earth's surface.

Her life's work recently earned her the honor of being named one of the Library of Virginia and Dominion Energy's 2022 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History, which celebrates African Americans.

Johnson's story sprouted from Virginia Beach summers and lasers.

Her parents were both teachers, and she remembers her dad saying, "If it's to be, it's up to me." Asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she said, "I saw some program about the first landing on the moon and so I said, 'That's what I want to be – an astronaut!'"

Johnson had an internship at NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton the summer before attending Lincoln University. "When I heard that I was going to be in a physics lab I was just disappointed."

But during a tour on her first assignment in a laser lab, one of the scientists accidentally burned a hole through their lab coat with a laser. Johnson was sold. "You get to shoot lasers; you get to put holes in stuff," she said. "I had so much fun that I came back each summer after that while I could."

Working in the Remote Sensing Technology Branch at NASA Langley, she was on a team that created solid-state laser systems to be used for measurements in space.

"NASA pays you to think, no matter where you think. They want you to be creative," she said. "We came up with some innovative ideas because we weren't forced into a box."

Johnson earned her bachelor's in physics and went on to earn a master's degree in electrical engineering from Pennsylvania State University. She then became program manager and lead engineer of a laser technology development program at NASA Langley in Hampton in 1991. She got married and built a home in Chesapeake.

Johnson was the right person in the right place at the right time one year in the late 1990s when she participated in a review panel at NASA's headquarters in Washington around the holidays. She hadn't wanted to work over the holidays but said, "I have this theory in my life that in every single cloud there is a silver lining – you just have to look for it."

The silver lining was she was the only person on the panel with relevant technical knowledge. She was promptly offered a position as associate director for exploratory missions in the Office of Earth Science at NASA's headquarters. It was a jump from her focus on lasers at Langley. "It's a matter of whether you're willing to fly a little higher so that you can get a bigger vantage point," she realized.

She took the leap and moved with her husband, Darryl, and their son, Jerrin, to Fairfax before building and settling into their current home in Woodbridge in 2001.

Johnson said she enjoys living in Woodbridge because she is drawn to the water and loves the Occoquan River.

She became more involved in policy at headquarters and started her doctorate in systems engineering at George Washington University. She wound up at the White House to fill a vacancy as the executive director of National Science and Technology Council.

In that role, which began the day before the 2008 presidential election, Johnson organized policy and national science and technology investment goals. In 2010 she transitioned to NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md., and she assumed her current role as deputy director for technology and research investments in 2012.

"I'm one of the people responsible for establishing the policy, for setting the environment so that our people can actually grow and operate in their full power," Johnson said.

Her executive assistant, Susie McManus, has worked with Johnson for about five years.

"One of the first things I noticed about her when I met her, she's someone who's obviously incredibly smart but ... she's so down to earth," McManus said. "There was never a stupid question to her."

Johnson recognizes the importance of diversity in science and technology fields after being treated differently as the only woman in rooms full of men.

"When you have all male leaders in an organization and they're drawn to people that they're comfortable with, the only thing you're going to get in the pool of candidates coming up is more of what they feel comfortable with," Johnson said.

"My immediate reaction to life has always been, 'How can I help?'" she said. "I don't want to hear, 'We need more women in STEM' anymore, I want to know what you are doing about it."

Johnson initiated conversations about the issue with people working in the space industry and private industry, as well as academicians, and she started the NASA Goddard Sustaining Women in STEM Roundtable in 2016.

The first roundtable, in Arlington, included morning panels and afternoon discussions among key leaders from multiple agencies. It has become an annual event that this year was held in Paris.

In 2015, Johnson also organized an annual fall sleepover event at Goddard for girls to stimulate their interest in science and technology. Many high schoolers participate in the STEM Girls Night each year, paired with college students and female NASA employees for a day of activities and competitions.

"By the next morning, so many of those girls said that this changed their lives, they know that they could do this kind of thing, and it made a difference for them," Johnson said.

McManus said Johnson likes to make everybody feel as though they're important. "That's not just with her work – that's with her personal life as well."

Although Johnson's work involves space exploration, she has a more down-to-earth perspective. "The world is really small, if you think about it, and the challenges that we face are similar no matter where you are."



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