

## **"The Legacy of Lt. Uhura: Astronaut Mae Jemison on Race in Space"**

**Conference explores issues of race in the context of space travel exploration**

**October 28, 2013 | Camille Jackson**

**DURHAM, NC - Astronaut Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman to go into space with the U.S. space program, told a crowd of nearly 100 Friday evening that Star Trek inspired her.**

**"As a little girl growing up on the south side of Chicago in the '60s I always knew I was going to be in space," she said from the podium in Richard White lecture Hall. Star Trek's Lt. Uhura, an African-American character from science fiction, encouraged her to literally reach for the stars.**

**"We may not all want to go but we all want to know what its like," she said of outer space. "It's a part of our deepest longing as humans. Fundamentally we want to know who we are and where we come from."**

**Jemison's talk opened the Department of African & African American Studies' "[Race in Space](#)" conference. The two-day event highlighted the astronauts, researchers, artists and authors who have studied the dynamics of race in the context of space travel and study.**

**"Who's going to be included in the process of space exploration? And are we going to reproduce the same dynamics of race and class on this planet?" said William Darity, the department chair and co-organizer.**

**Jemison is the principal behind "[100 Year Star Ship](#)," a program she designed to ensure that humans will have the capability to travel to another star system in the next 100 years.**

**During her talk she described how civil rights legislation opened the doors for African-American scientists and engineers.**

**"Companies that wanted federal money had to have an equal opportunity program in place," she said. "NASA had to take them in and offer the same vocational training. It's didn't always go smoothly but it made a difference."**

**By the '70s, a new crop of women, also inspired by Star Trek actress Nichelle Nichols, joined NASA.**

**"She used her celebrity to bring in applications -- and she did it on her own," Jemison said.**

**Durham resident, [Ruthie Lyle-Cannon](#), said Jemison had inspired her to pursue electrical engineering when she was 15 years old. She later became the first African American woman to earn a doctorate in electrical engineering from New York University.**

**Jemison advocated for diversity within the STEM disciplines, because diversity of perspectives can help speed advancements in these and other areas.**

**She said space exploration is the basis of much of the innovation and behind some of humanity's most significant advances. Rather than distance us from the problems and experiences on Earth, interest in space and the study of other planets helps us learn about our own planet, she said.**

**For example, studying space has advanced knowledge about extreme environments, insulation technology and how to make items smaller and lighter. Studying the effects of space travel in low gravity has improved our understanding of human physiology.**

**The interest in space travel is also shaping research on topics such as how to manage big data and communications across vast distances. Space travel requires better understanding of decision-making and human relations in close quarters, how we eat, and even how we clothe our bodies.**

**"You're going to have to make your own clothing. It's got to be made from recyclable material because there's no cotton in space. Maybe polyester suits are coming back, you must think about the cleaning and disposal of clothing, one of our most resource-intensive processes, differently," Jemison said. "Once we think about life in space, it changes life on earth."**