

HAMPTON VA

NEWS RELEASE

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Robin McCormick | rmccormick@hampton.gov | 757-728-3276
22 Lincoln Street | Hampton, VA 23669

Groundbreaking NASA mathematician, men's health advocate given Distinguished Citizen Medals

April 27, 2016 – Two Hamptonians, Katherine G. Johnson and Charlie W. Hill, have been awarded the city's Distinguished Citizen Medal for their extraordinary service to Hampton. The award, established in 1964, is roughly Hampton's version of a key to the city. It has been given about two dozen times.

Katherine G. Johnson worked for NASA as a mathematician, or “computer.” As such, she calculated the trajectory for Alan Shepard, the first American in space. Even after NASA began using electronic computers, Astronaut John Glenn requested that she personally recheck the calculations made by the new electronic computers before the mission that saw him become the first American to orbit the earth. Johnson continued to work at NASA until 1986, combining her math talent with electronic computer skills. Her calculations proved critical to the success of the Apollo Moon landing program and the start of the Space Shuttle program. She retired after 33 years with NASA (and its predecessor, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, or NACA). An African-American who graduated from college at age 18, Johnson was prepared to be a research mathematician but became a teacher, which was the only field open to her until NACA expanded its pool of “computers who wore skirts” to include African-Americans. The government hired her in 1953.

Johnson was honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, by President Obama in November. She has been the recipient of numerous other honors, including three honorary doctorates. A movie based on her life and the life of other NACA computers is being filmed with Taraji P. Henson portraying Johnson. Other actors include Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monae, Kevin Costner and Kirsten Dunst. Pharrell Williams has joined as a producer and is writing songs for the movie, “Hidden Figures,” which is scheduled for a January 2017 release.

Charlie W. Hill is a co-founder, board member and past president of the Hampton Roads Prostate Health Forum, a regional nonprofit that offers health screenings and workshops to encourage men to talk about prostate health. In January, Hill attended the White House Dialogue on Men's Health as part of a delegation representing the Minority Men's Health Initiative based at Hampton University. He is a retired vice president of Landmark Media and has served on a variety of boards and commissions throughout Hampton Roads and Virginia, including the Virginia Air and Space Museum and the Peninsula chapter of 100 Black Men of America.

For a list of others who have been awarded the Distinguished Citizen Medal, go to <http://hampton.gov/DocumentCenter/View/7488>.



Photo above: Katherine Johnson, with her husband Jim, receives Distinguished Citizen Medal from Hampton Mayor George Wallace (left) and Vice Mayor Linda Curtis (right).

Photo below: Charlie W. Hill (center) with his wife, Golden Bethune-Hill, and Mayor Wallace.



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