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Amy Biancolli: Personal connection to NASA history

AMY BIANCOLLI Published 3:47 pm, Thursday, January 12, 2017



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Glenville, NY - January 24, 2013 - (Photo by Joe Putrock/Special to the Times Union) - Union College professor Twitty Styles applauds event honoree Monica Wilson Roach whom he described as a "lovely person, a ... [more](#)

The real Dorothy Vaughan didn't exactly resemble Octavia Spencer. She was thinner. Lighter-skinned. And she didn't necessarily take such hard-charging, hallway-striding control of her high-school students in Farmville, Va., the way she leads the women of the "Colored Computers" room at NASA in "Hidden Figures," the new film about three unsung African-American women who helped work the numbers in NASA's early space quest.

But Twitty J. Styles, a professor emeritus of biology at Union College and a long-ago pupil of Vaughan, sees much of his old math teacher in Spencer's performance. It's in her straightforwardness, in that air of resolve. That friendliness and gift of gab: "She liked to talk," he said, after catching the film opening weekend. "She was loquacious."

Most of all, the late Mrs. Vaughan lives on in the film's portrayal of a kind, spirited woman determined to lead and lift everyone in her charge.

"She was about 5-foot-3 — very authoritarian, no-nonsense. She tried to help us do the best we could, to get the best out of us, and she was a woman who tried to teach the entire student. ... She was interested in the total person," said Styles. "She realized there was a brighter side, somewhere. And I think in her mind she said, 'I want these kids to do well, because one of these days, you know — they're the future.' "

More Information

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Now 89, Styles graduated in 1944 from the Robert Russa Moton High School, an all-black school (now an historic landmark) in Prince Edward County. Ten years later, Brown v. the Board of Education declared segregated schools in the county — and everywhere else — unconstitutional. "I was sent to a separate, unequal school," he said. "Dorothy taught in a

separate, unequal school."

Directed and co-written by Theodore Melfi from Margot Lee Shetterly's book of the same name, "Hidden Figures" tells of Vaughan and two NASA colleagues — Mary Jackson and Katherine G. Johnson, played by Janelle Monáe and Taraji P. Henson — at a time when Langley Field, like so much of the South, was plagued with the deeply ingrained habits of racism. The film is a smart, spry celebration of accomplished African-American women who contributed to the space program, and ultimately flourished in it, despite enormous societal roadblocks.

Styles loved the movie. He loved it as someone who knew Vaughan, yes. But he also appreciates the

film for its power to raise awareness and remind viewers of a time and place not so long ago, and not so far away, when blacks were exiled to separate water fountains. In one of the movie's recurring bits, Johnson runs a half mile across campus, heels clacking on pavement, to NASA's lone bathroom for black women. In another, she's assigned her own coffeepot by white male co-workers with minds even narrower than their ties.

"People do forget," Styles said. For anyone unfamiliar with the issues or the era, "The movie explained it quite well. ... What you observed with the black toilets and the black coffeepot was faced by blacks every day."

Including Styles. "I lived it all. Of course."

But even for those who didn't grow up in the segregated South, the film should strike a chord. "I don't know any person of color who can't go to the movie and identify with most of it. ... There's institutional racism throughout the country — at the national level, the state level, the local level — and it pervades our culture."

Styles studied with Vaughan for three years, taking general math, then algebra, then trigonometry. The first two years, she worked at Langley after school ended each May. After the third year, she never came back, having assumed a full-time position with NASA. He's certain that she contributed to his eventual success: his schooling at Virginia Union University, Columbia and NYU; his professorship at Union. All of his teachers contributed. They all aimed to "get us to another level," to bring them to a better place with a better quality of life.

At one point in the film, Spencer barks out a line at her co-stars: "You don't mess with Mrs. Vaughan!" No, Styles said. Dorothy Vaughan never barked that same line at her students. But she had that same forthrightness, that same commitment to "improve herself and move forward and help her family," he said. "And she indirectly wanted to bring us along on her coattails."

Last summer, he and a handful of classmates reunited in Farmville. Inevitably, they got to talking about their former teacher. The conversation flowed with fondness and admiration.

Learning about Vaughan's at NASA "was a revelation to me," he said. "And I was so proud to know

that I had been associated with a woman who was brilliant, and a woman who had so much determination, who was so warm, who had so much strength, and how she persevered. Because it wasn't easy in those days. It wasn't easy for anybody."

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