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Amy Biancolli: Personal connection to NASA history

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

The real Dorothy Vaughan didn't exactly resemble Octavia Spencer. She was thinner. Lighter-

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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