

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 163, No. 4

Serving Chicago's legal community for 162 years

## ‘Hidden Figures’ tells an inspiring history left untold

Tale from early NASA years focuses less on tech feats, more on social, human obstacles

Every little girl should see “Hidden Figures.” Big ones too. Dads, grandpas and brothers as well.

It’s like a classic sports movie: The stakes are high, the team is challenged to act as a cohesive unit, things go awry and it ain’t over until it’s over.

Set during the Kennedy administration, amid post-Sputnik Cold War anxiety, this family-friendly feature tells the inspiring story of three African-American math geniuses who worked for the space program at a time when the women who performed mathematical computations were called “computers.”

Adapted from Margot Lee Shetterly’s biographic book of the same title, the three women who are the focus of the film, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson are presented as a familiar trio of sassy, sexy and shy. These tropes are well worn, yet move the story along.

As Dorothy, Octavia Spencer is comically sassy — it’s her Oscar category. Singer Janelle Monae is Mary, a sexy firebrand. Taraji P. Henson plays Katherine as a demure widowed mother of three

daughters — half Church Lady, half Rain Man — whose gift is recognized by Al Harrison (Kevin Costner), the head of the Flight Division at Langley Research Center.

Katherine wins Harrison’s sponsorship through her excellent performance, persistence and creative problem solving, even as she blushingly accepts the attentions of a dashing Lt. Col. Jim Johnson (Mahershala Ali).

The suspense of the story stems not only from our worry whether the NASA team has the right stuff to send an American orbiting around Earth and get him back again, but whether our heroines can conquer the race and gender obstacles of the 1960s South in time to save the day by using their singular superpower: math.

The space program’s progressiveness in hiring women was not matched by its compensation and promotion practices, and Virginia’s Jim Crow laws operated to deny the women access to books, classes, certification and other tools they needed to advance in their profession.

Mary needs specific courses to get an engineering degree and



REBECCA  
L. FORD

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel at Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at [rford@scharfbanks.com](mailto:rford@scharfbanks.com).

has to file suit to attend segregated classes because Virginia has simply ignored *Brown v. Board of Education*.

An IBM mainframe is delivered to NASA. Dorothy, ahead of the game, tries to check out a book on the programming language Fortran from the segregated public library, and the police escort her out of the building.

Katherine’s supervisor, chief of engineering Paul Stafford (Jim Parsons, perfectly cast against type), redacts the data she is given to analyze and demands she take her name off papers they co-author. In an ongoing indignity, she can only use the “colored” bathroom, which is half a mile away on Langley’s West Campus.

The women’s antagonists are not mustache-twirling villains or cross burners. They are, as Hannah Arendt warned, banal. When things come to a head, a frustrated Harrison asks who is responsible for making the rules. “You, sir,” Katherine replies. “You are the boss. You just have to act like one.”

There isn’t time for this nonsense. In April 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin orbited Earth and the U.S. found itself in

second place of a two-nation race. As John Glenn (Glen Powell) cracks, “The Russians can’t build a damn refrigerator, how’d they beat us into space?”

The danger of Glenn’s February 1962 earth orbit is palpable. As Harrison explains, the space capsule is just a tin can strapped to a missile blasted into space.

Less than a month after Glenn’s death on Dec. 8, “Hidden Figures” reminds us of his fundamental decency. Although we know he had a distinguished career as an Ohio senator and even returned to space in 1998 at age 77, we are on the edge of our seats in fear for his life as his tin-can fireball hurtles toward the earth.

Costner, 62, for his part, has become the baby-boom generation’s Atticus Finch (in “Mockingbird,” not “Watchman”). In addition to his large commercial films, Costner selects smaller, heart-tugging movies that seem to embody Vivek Murthy’s observation that, “America is a promise we have made to one another.”

“Hidden Figures” and its dances-with-astronauts theme reside in the same constellation as other Costner gems, such as “McFarland, USA” and “Black or White.”

Sitting next to me in the theater were a young dad and his daughter, who seemed to be about 7 years old. As the credits rolled, the dad exclaimed, “That was a really great movie,” and the little girl nodded vigorously, animating her ponytail.

Like me, they were sent into orbit by this uplifting patriotic history lesson — the triumph of the women, the bouncy Pharrell Williams soundtrack, and the courage and character of John Glenn.

The three of us were over the moon.