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### 'HIDDEN FIGURES' AUTHOR VISITS CAMPUS

MARGOT LEE SHETTERLY IMPARTS THE VALUE OF STORYTELLING TO PRESERVE HISTORY.

by [Kelley McGee](#) | April 6, 2022

Read time: about 2 min

Author and Hampton Roads native Margot Lee Shetterly urged students to pay attention to what sparks their curiosity, and to let that passion guide them. For Shetterly, it was telling the story of Katherine Johnson and the other pioneering, segregated female NASA mathematicians who helped process the aeronautic data critical to the success of the country's first space flights.

Speaking to a packed house at the Ferguson Center for the Performing Arts, Shetterly acknowledged that many of her readers had never heard of these so-called "human computers" prior to the publication of her *New York Times* bestselling book *Hidden Figures*, and the subsequent Oscar-nominated hit film. However, she said, she was not the first to tell their story.

"Many have said to me, 'wow, this story has never been told.' But that's not true. The Black newspapers around the country had been telling the story of Katherine Johnson for many years. Johnson was a celebrity of sorts, even before she performed that amazing calculation for astronaut John Glenn."

That calculation was a dramatic point in the movie. Glenn issued a stern order to "get the girl to do it" – meaning he wanted Katherine Johnson to re-check the numbers that came out of the IBM computer before his 1962 Friendship



Shetterly chatted and signed books for students after her address.

7 flight, during which he became the first American to orbit the earth.

“Not everything in the movie was historically accurate, but that specific part of it was absolutely true,” Shetty said. “Obviously the real NASA is a little bit more organized, and Glenn didn’t actually say that three minutes before the mission was supposed to launch. But the essence of it, saying ‘get the girl to do it,’ actually happened.”

While Shetterly admitted she initially struggled with the creative liberties Hollywood took with her meticulously researched book, she knew the story needed a level of dramatization, a spark of emotion necessary to reach viewers. “Since I paid rigid attention to facts, I assumed they would in the movie. But the process helped me to understand facts are where you start, but facts are not enough to move people. You must move people if you want to get your message out, whether you’re a writer or a leader, trying to inspire people”

Laura Puaca, associate professor of [history](#) and director of the women’s and gender studies program as well as the Hampton Roads Oral History Project, organized the event. She was excited to bring Shetterly to campus, explaining that, “by centering the lives and experiences of Black women in STEM at nearby NASA Langley, Margot Lee Shetterly reshapes our understanding of some of the most important developments of the 20th century. That much of this story takes place in Hampton Roads helps us to situate ourselves and our surroundings within the historical past.”

Over 100 people, mostly students, lined up across the Ferguson lobby after Shetterly spoke for a chance to meet the author and get their book signed.

“Listening to Mrs. Shetterly was truly inspiring,” said CeOnna Battle ‘23, a [neuroscience](#) and biology double major. She lit up when talking about the stories she was able to bring to light. I loved hearing about the history of Hampton Roads and the incredible women, especially women of color, that changed the world for the better.”

“I was born and raised in Chesapeake, Virginia, so the release of *Hidden Figures* was a monumental event for Hampton Roads. I read the book as a part of my school curriculum in 2017, shortly after its release, so it was fascinating to attend Ms. Shetterly’s lecture,” said [psychology](#) major Holly Banta ‘23.

“I like that Ms. Shetterly’s presentation included some of the real people and stories behind the history. Too often historical events are seen as being monolithic, one movement and identity, which causes individual faces to be lost in translation. In reality every movement is made up of individual people with their own identities and stories to tell, which Ms. Shetterly wonderfully told.” Katie Hatch ‘23, a history major.

For her next project, Shetterly said she’s been focused on the same time period in history. “But instead of scientists, the protagonists are business people and entrepreneurs. People who owned the black newspapers. Who became venture capitalists after very humble beginnings. I’m looking at the idea of social mobility, the American dream, race, work identity and what is all meant in the mid-20th century.”

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