

## Whether or not it takes the Oscar, 'Hidden Figures' wins with Southland students



By [Donna Vickroy Contact Reporter](#)

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You might say Oscar contention helped reveal Katherine Johnson's accomplishments not only to the nation, but to family members as well.

Growing up, Michael Jones knew that his great aunt had once worked as a mathematician for [NASA](#).

"But I didn't know she sent (the astronauts) up into space," said Jones, a junior at Southland College Prep High School in Richton Park.

Johnson, portrayed in the film "Hidden Figures," which is nominated for Best Picture, is married to Michael's great uncle. She lives in Virginia.

Even though Jones's family often visits her and did so last summer, the teen said he knew her only as his smart, unassuming relative, not a mathematical genius who helped launch astronaut John Glenn into orbit while simultaneously launching African American women across racial barriers during the height of segregation.

"The extent of her accomplishments was unnoticed to even us," said Jones, who lives in Matteson.

He began realizing the significance of his great aunt's contributions when President Barack Obama presented her with the Medal of Freedom in 2015.

"That was a surprise — we were like, 'She really did all that?' We were shocked," he said.



[Taraji P. Henson rents Southwest Side theater for free 'Hidden Figures' screening](#)

Still, when he learned Johnson was to be featured in a motion picture, Jones said, he was excited and shared the news with friends but still "didn't think it would be this big of a movie."

Up for three Academy Awards, "Hidden Figures" is the top-grossing Oscar nominee, earning \$119.5 million at the box office as of week's end, surpassing "La La Land," which is nominated for 14 such awards.

Across the country, cinemas have been offering free and private screenings of the film to school groups in honor of Black History Month.

Last week, Jones and his 500 charter school classmates attended a showing at Marcus Theatres in Chicago Heights. Afterward, several students reflected on the film's story and its message.

Sophomore Indya Gettings said: "I really enjoyed it. I liked how they shed light on a story that we didn't know about. I like how they showed that African American women were essentially behind the mission. I like how they finally gave them their credit."



### ['Hidden Figures' attracts Southland residents](#)

Noelle Robinson, a senior, said, "Everyone, no matter if you are black or a female, needs to see that movie and witness (the women's) struggle and see how they overcame it."

"Hidden Figures" is the story of three female African-American mathematicians who, despite racial and gender obstacles — including limited access to education, meetings and nearby restrooms — press forward in their mission to help the United States space program keep pace with the Soviets. Johnson is credited by NASA for her mathematical computations of the trajectory for America's first human spaceflight by astronaut Alan Shepard aboard Freedom 7 in 1961 and Glenn's historic Friendship 7 flight in 1962 as the first American to orbit the earth.

As astonished as Kapri Echols said she was by the story, she said she was not surprised that it had only surfaced recently.

"A lot of our parents and grandparents didn't even know their history because it was never written down. Stories like these are brand new to us," the senior said. "For generations, we missed the mark when it comes to the things we've done as a culture. We're always put in the background. Uncovering this story is progress for us. History is important. And representation is important, too. A lot of the time we are misrepresented culturally so putting us out there as strong, independent, intellectual beings – African American women – is powerful. It's something that we needed to see."

She added that no matter which career path she chooses, she is prepared to face obstacles, including oppression.

"This movie really shows us that no matter who you are, where you are, you can do it. If your heart is set on it and your mind is set on it, you can do it. The world is set up to block you but that doesn't mean you can't prevail," she said.

MarKeia Kellogg said she believes the story is only coming to light now because, "America is finally ready to hear it."

For a long time, the sophomore said, society wasn't ready to see "these type of people be successful" but the film's impressive showing is evidence that the nation will embrace stories about African American accomplishments.

As part of the monthlong celebration of their collective history and culture, the Southland College Prep students will pen letters to Johnson, expressing their thoughts on the film and her accomplishments. A collection of the school's letters will be bound into a presentation book for Jones to present to his 99-year-old great-aunt during spring break when he's on a college tour in Newport News, Virginia.

In addition, at 6:30 p.m. on Feb. 27, the school will host a Black History festival featuring its 62-member dance group, of which Jones is a member. The dancers will perform four contemporary jazz numbers choreographed by dance instructor Gloria Chatman to the score of "Hidden Figures," composed by Pharrell Williams.

Among the numbers is a tap performance called "Running," set to the song played while Johnson, played by Taraji Henson, runs each day to a restroom nearly a half-mile away from her office because she was denied access to the "white" ladies room nearby.

John Anderson, a senior, found parts of the movie upsetting, particularly the bathroom runs.

"I was upset, but knew I would be because of the discrimination that went on at that time," he said. "At the same time, I felt extremely proud because no matter what the women went through, they didn't complain. They did what they needed to do, they got the job done."

Anderson added that he appreciated that the film showed how both female and male characters evolved, eventually accepting that the African American women were just as capable.

Camille Johnson said it was inspiring to her to see "African American women who were excelling in math and who were able to put those skills toward something good."

In addition, she was able to actually recognize some of the equations. "I was like, 'That's velocity, that's calculus.' I was able to analyze some of those little details," said the senior who hopes to pursue a career in oncology.

Whether the film wins the Oscar at the Feb. 26 Academy Awards or not, Kaitlyn Barksdale said: "Telling these types of stories will make a difference. The fact that we're hearing about this means more people will be inspired to tell their stories and come out from the shadows and learn about our history. Movies like this motivate us as a culture."

And even though many of the students said they believe racial barriers exist today, Barksdale, a junior, said, "I feel we've moved a lot further since that era — we don't have blatant segregation but it still exists. Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there. Yes, the oppression is still apparent. It's gotten better but there is still a lot of change to come."

The movie, she added, is a step in the direction toward equality.

Tyler McCullar, a senior said, to advance society, "My speech coach tells us all the time, 'Tell your story.' And that's what happened in the movie. Honestly, whether it wins the award or not, it wins with us."

[dvickroy@tribpub.com](mailto:dvickroy@tribpub.com)

Twitter @dvickroy

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