

Community Comment
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Sam Pennisi

A respect for science

We don't get out to the movies as much as we used to ~~or as much as we would like~~. But we saw a film with some friends ~~at the newly remodeled Minor Theater in Areata the other night~~ which hit a number of chords with me. Before I go on, if you haven't been to the Minor since it reopened, check it out. ~~The seats are amazing, there is limited food and drink service available right to a narrow table in front of you, and the quality of the picture and sound are excellent. We have a renewed treasure in town.~~

SP

I started my college career at Cal Poly in Pomona with a major in Aerospace Engineering. My older brother was an engineer and my dad worked in a machine shop. ~~It seemed a natural fit since~~ I was very interested in the space program. It turned out that higher mathematics and I didn't see eye to eye. In the two years before I found a better fit for me at Humboldt, I was exposed to the basics of the space program and the science that supported it. By 1965 and 66, the U.S. was winning the space race. After losing to the Soviets who had the first man in space and the first satellite, we were well on our way to the moon. The Apollo program was reaching farther and farther out to realize President Kennedy's goal of a moon landing and return by the end of the decade. As you recall, the landing took place in 1969. The U.S. was captivated by this effort as was the entire world. We needed the optimism since this decade also brought us the assassination of a president, a candidate for president and the leader of the civil rights movement. It was a raucous and disturbing time. ~~The Viet Nam war was becoming more and more unpopular at the same time.~~

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The film we saw brought all this back to me. It's called Hidden Figures. It tells the true story of a few brilliant black women mathematicians that worked for NASA as computers. The first IBM computer was not yet installed and these women did much of the calculations required for space flight. I did enough of this to know how complex these problems were. Some of the math was invented as the program advanced. Just think about what it took to figure the launch time and place, the orbital speeds, the re-entry speeds and the need to come down near enough for a recovery at sea. ~~Figure into all that the rotation of the earth, the height of the orbit and many more variables.~~ Add to ?

SP

The film also highlighted the racial discrimination and tension in the south at that time. This NASA facility was in Virginia. The story is compelling and the characters are real. And so was the science.

Everyone, it seemed, was hooked on science. We were fascinated by the people in the news as the program advanced. The astronauts were certainly heroes but so were the people behind the scenes. We watched as a nation and a world as each launch brought us closer to touching the moon. We waited out the tense days of the Apollo 13 mission when

we nearly lost three men. But NASA figured out one solution after another and brought them back in one piece.

We respected education and science then. We trusted them with the very success of a nation. We expected them to push the envelope and we were not disappointed.

We let highly educated scientist do their job and we listened to them.
We need to have that same respect again and get politics out of science.

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment.