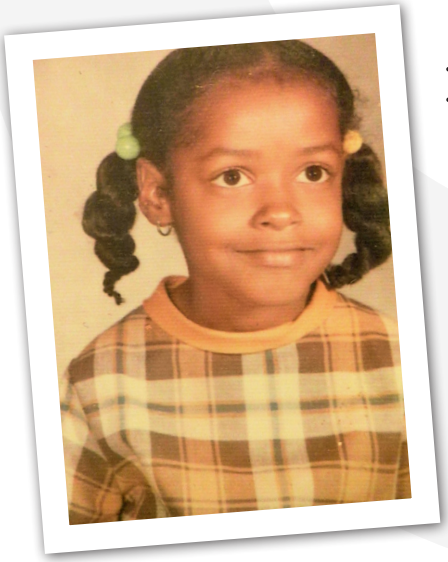
Dear Sankofa Club Kids,

My name is Sharon Caples McDougle and I am writing to you to tell my story and let you all know that you can achieve whatever you want in life!

I grew up in a small town, Moss Point, Mississippi, with 11 brothers and sisters. My Dad died when I was 4 years old and my Mom died when I was 7 years old and I was very sad without them. I lived with my oldest sister and her family until I graduated from high school. I had to work very hard at home because I had to do all of the chores by myself.



I loved and looked forward to going to school each and every day - I even wished I could go to school on Saturdays and Sundays! I loved learning new things, and I really loved reading and spelling. I won the spelling bee when I was in second

grade and was chosen to read "Twas the Night Before Christmas" for our Christmas program. I remember when I was too young to go to school, I would look through my brothers school books, dreaming of the day I'd be able to go to school, too. I had the best teachers and they played a large part in shaping me into the person I am today. They not only taught me reading, writing and math, they also gave me lots of hugs and praise for getting good grades, and I really liked that.

I wanted to go to college and become a Kindergarten teacher or be a flight attendant when I grew up, but I didn't have money to go to college. An Air Force recruiter visited my school and spoke to my class my senior year in high school. He said we could travel and see the world, and they would pay for college while working in the Air Force. After graduating from high school I joined the Air Force and served for seven and a half years.

I attended the School of Aerospace Medicine where I received my training to become an Aerospace Physiology Specialist and was the only African American woman in my class. I assisted in high altitude training and performed hazardous duty as an inside observer during hypobaric and hyperbaric chamber operations. I also inspected and maintained flight equipment used by pilots/aircrew in the SR-71 and U-2 reconnaissance aircraft ("spy planes"). The equipment included full pressure suits, survival equipment and oxygen systems. I sized and fitted the pilots/ aircrew members' pressure suits, suited them up, and tested them before taking them out to the aircraft and strapping them in. But, before I suited them up and strapped them in, I loaded the survival seat kits and parachutes into the aircraft. I traveled to several countries many times including Greece, Korea, Japan, and England, as well as stateside locations, in support of the aircrew and missions. I had the best job in the Air Force - I had so much fun traveling the world that

I never went to college.

After working with pressure suits in the Air Force, I realized the only place I could probably get a job would be at NASA working with the astronauts. I worked as a Space Shuttle Crew Escape Equipment (CEE) Suit Technician. I was the only African American team member in my department at the time I was hired.

My Air Force training and experience played a major role in me being hired. All astronauts who flew aboard the space shuttle had to wear the Launch/Entry suit

(which was changed to the Advanced Crew Escape Suit later). The equipment they had to wear included the suit, helmet, boots, gloves, communications cap, harness assembly, liquid cooling garments (underwear), and most wore diapers, too.

The highlight of my career was suiting up Dr. Mae Jemison. Everyone knows Dr. Jemison was the first African American woman to travel into space, but many don't know that I, an African American woman with her own firsts, suited her up. I was Mae's suit tech for her historic mission aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavor. I worked closely with her during all of her training leading up to launch, as well as actual launch day and landing of the space shuttle. I inspected and tested all of her equipment to make sure everything was

in the best condition for her training events and launch day. I would prepare everything for her and help her put on all of her equipment.

After working there for four years my supervisor noticed I was performing Crew Chief duties while I was still a technician and promoted me to Crew Chief. I was the first woman and first African American to be promoted to CEE Crew Chief.

I worked very hard; I was reliable and dedicated to my crew and the company – earning the respect of my peers, astronauts and management.

In my new position I was responsible for leading a team of technicians to suit up astronaut crews. I had to make sure the astronauts were provided with outstanding support during suited training, launch, and landing events. I traveled from Houston to Kennedy Space Center where I

worked in support of many space shuttle launches, suiting up many astronauts. One of my most memorable missions as crew chief was leading the first and only all-female suit tech crew supporting space shuttle mission STS-78.

Later in my career I became the first and only female and first and only African American promoted to the position of Manager of the CEE Processing department. In this position I managed a team of 25+ employees responsible for processing the equipment worn by the astronaut crews aboard the space shuttle and strapping the astronauts into the space shuttle. I held this position until the Space Shuttle Program ended in 2011. I continued working until 2012 to help close-out the program, ending an illustrious 22 year career. I was very fortunate to have one of the coolest careers ever.

In closing, I'd like to leave you all with this - anything is possible, if you work hard to achieve it. Don't be afraid of technology, science or space exploration. There are many career paths in these fields - you don't have to become an astronaut. I also advise you all to not put off going to college, if that is the path you choose. And, lastly, you can have a successful career without having a college degree.

Sharon McDougle