



Nichelle Nichols

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

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Nichelle Nichols was an actor, singer and dancer best known for her groundbreaking role of Lieutenant Uhura in the original Star Trek series.

Ms. Nichols was born in Chicago in 1932. She started studying dance with the Chicago Ballet Company at the age of 12. This led to her professional career as a singer and dancer. One of her earliest jobs was singing for two popular jazz bands led by the famous Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton. She toured the United States, Canada and Europe.

In 1959, Ms. Nichols was a principal dancer in the film version of Porgy and Bess, the first great American opera. She performed in the stage version as well. In fact, she appeared in many theater productions before her time on television.



The original **Star Trek** series began in 1966.

Ms. Nichols portrayed Communications Officer and Translator, Lieutenant Nyota Uhura. She was one of the first Black women featured in a major television series.

After the first season ended, Ms. Nichols informed Star Trek creator, Gene Roddenberry, that she was leaving the series because she wanted to return to performing on Broadway. But civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. convinced her to stay.

Dr. King and Ms. Nichols were both at the same event the weekend after she handed in her resignation letter. Dr. King was a huge fan and requested to meet her. He shared with her that he felt her role in the show was vitally important for the **Civil Rights Movement**.

Ms. Nichols was playing one of the first non-stereotypical characters on television, breaking new ground for how Black people were portrayed in front of a wide audience.

Stereotypes are simple portrayals of people—usually based on things like their race, profession, or age. There are many people of color throughout history who have been cast in one-dimensional roles.

The character Lieutenant Uhura defied stereotypes!

In one of Ms. Nichols' interviews on National Public Radio, or NPR, she shared that Dr. King said by playing Uhura, Ms. Nichols was, "reflecting what we are fighting for," – referring to the Civil Rights Movement. He also told her it was one of the only shows he and his wife allowed their children to stay up and watch.

After her conversation with Dr. King, she decided to stay in the cast. She went on to play Uhura for all three seasons of the original run of the show, as well as in six Star Trek movies.

Nichelle Nichols' influence went beyond her time on the show.

Ms. Nichols was very interested in space exploration and The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or **NASA**, invited her to work with them as their ambassador. NASA is an agency responsible for the civil space program and important space research.

In her work for NASA, she advocated for more women and people of color to become astronauts. Some of the people who were recruited through her advocacy were Dr. Sally Ride, the first American female astronaut, and Colonel Guion Bluford, the first African American astronaut. Mae Jemison, the first African American woman in space, has also publicly said that she was inspired by Ms. Nichols and her work on Star Trek.

Ms. Nichols also served on the board of the National Space Institute, a nonprofit space advocacy organization. Many employees said that seeing her play Lieutenant Uhura inspired them to join the agency.

Nichelle Nichols used her art and passion to inspire new interest in science and space exploration. Her legacy is galactic!

Glossary

Star Trek – An American science fiction media franchise created by Gene Roddenberry which began with the 1960s television series and quickly became a worldwide pop-culture favorite.

Civil Rights Movement – A nonviolent social and political movement where Black Americans worked to gain equal rights in the 1950s and 1960s. It was led by such leaders as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The movement sought to end forced segregation, injustice and discrimination. (*source: Twinkl USA*)

NASA – Stands for National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NASA is a United States government agency that is responsible for science and technology related to air and space. They are best known for projects like Apollo, where astronauts were sent to the moon on several missions between 1968 and 1972. (*sources: nasa.gov and study.com*)

Give it Some Thought

- Why was Nichelle Nichols' role as Lieutenant Uhura important for the Civil Rights Movement?
- Besides her acting career, what other contributions did Nichelle Nichols make to the field of space exploration?
- Through her actions, advocacy, and fight for representation in entertainment and science, what values or qualities did Nichelle Nichols demonstrate?

Use Your Imagination

Nichelle Nichols' character, Lieutenant Uhura, was the chief communications officer responsible for all incoming and outgoing transmissions on board the Star Trek enterprise. Inspired by her character, draw or construct a model of your own communications device. Include:

- Features you think would be useful for interstellar communication.
- Messages you would like to share with the universe.