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OLYMPIA

Modern-Day 'Hidden Figure' Shares Her Inspiring

When Olympia LePoint was 6 years old, a school field trip altered her young life. The South Central, Los Angeles, native says she “became alive” as she viewed a mission control room and jet engines at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California, where her late grandfather was a janitor.

“It was uplifting for me,” LePoint, 40, tells PEOPLE. “I told myself I wanted to be like the men I saw on the walls who were launching rockets.”

When LePoint was growing up, the world of rocket science was indeed a man’s world — one she aspired to join.

Similar to the Oscar-nominated film *Hidden Figures*, which centers on a team of African-American women who served as the brains behind astronaut John Glenn’s launch into orbit, LePoint overcame workplace sexism as she made triumphant strides in rocket science, and she is grateful for the women who came before her.

“I thank these women because they opened up the door for me to show my confidence and intelligence,” she says. “The film is so important because it shows how science can unite people and connect people. Had it not been for the women highlighted in the film, I would not be where I am today.”

LePoint struggled before landing her dream job at Boeing at just 21 years old. She grew up in poverty and lived next door to a crack house with her siblings and single mother. LePoint says she savored the image of becoming a rocket scientist, revisiting her field trip memory when she was facing challenges in school.

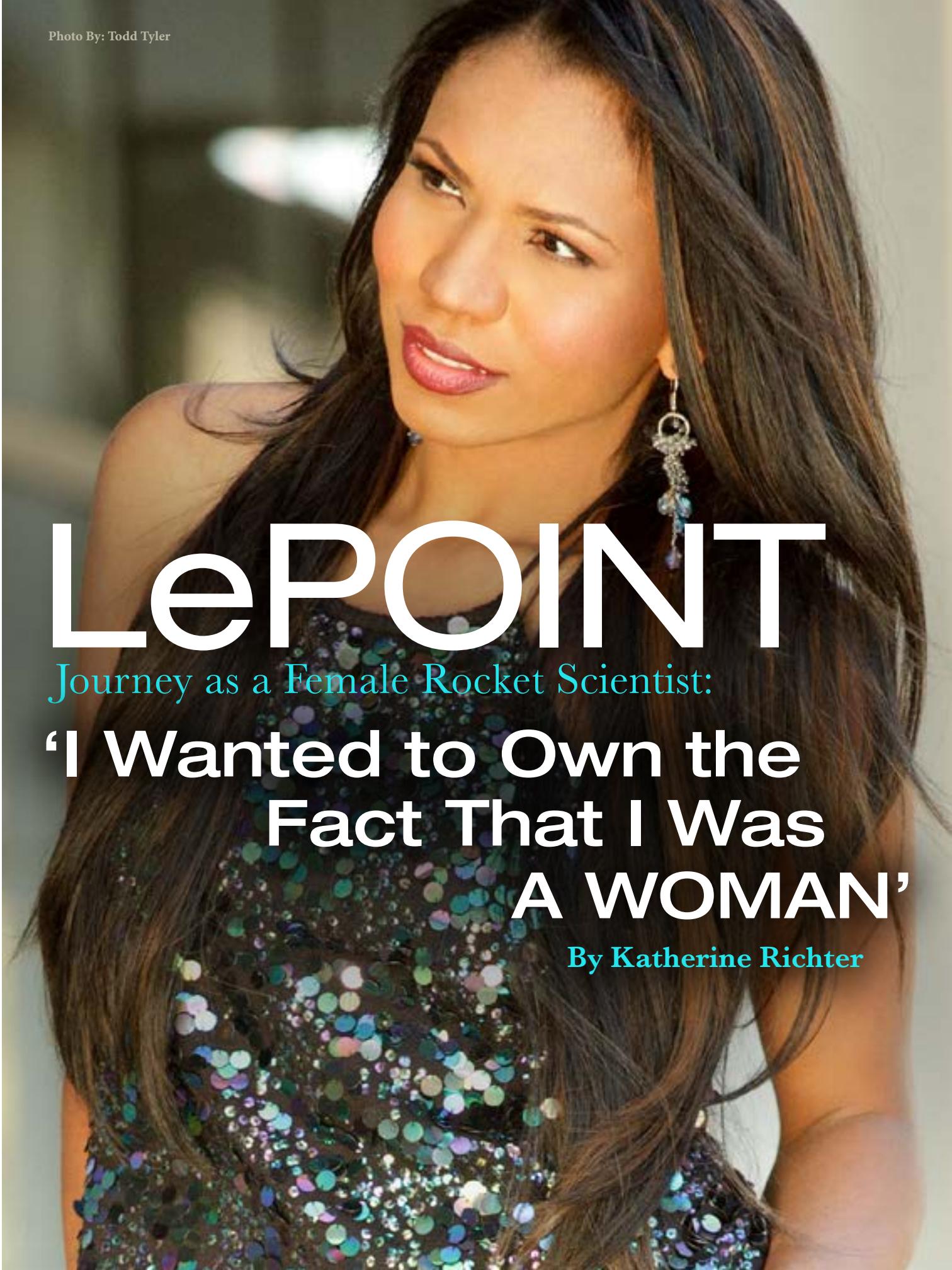
At 10, a gang member sliced her face, leading her mother to enroll her in a safer school two hours from home, she says. Adjusting to a 5 a.m. wake-up call and a new environment, LePoint’s grades took a toll. In eighth grade, she failed math despite loving the subject.

LePOINT

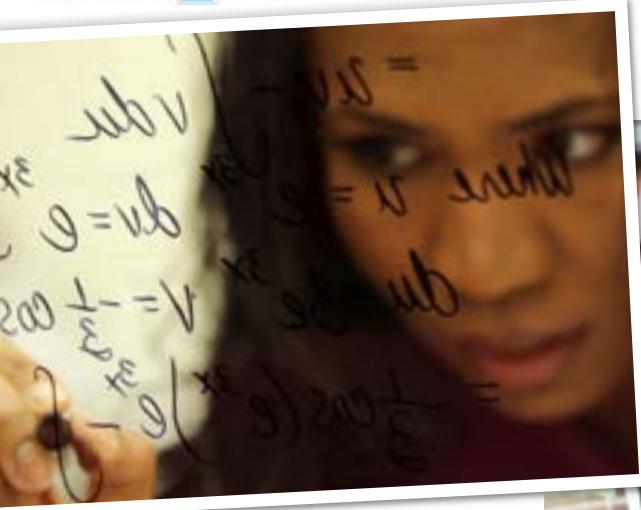
Journey as a Female Rocket Scientist:

‘I Wanted to Own the Fact That I Was A WOMAN’

By Katherine Richter



“I was going to make science exciting.”



Photos by Richard Chambers

LePoint credits a math tutor who helped her turn around her grades with free tutoring during winter break. She borrowed the \$1.35 bus fare from a kind gas station attendant to make the long commute to each session. She went on to earn her Bachelor of Science in Mathematics at California State University, Northridge, which she says is her proudest accomplishment, since she put herself through school through jobs (including part-time modeling) and scholarship money.

In 1998 — at 21 years old — LePoint accepted an analyst position at Boeing, which directly supports NASA. After a few months on the job, she officially became a rocket scientist. Her job included using mathematics to calculate the probability of catastrophic explosions within flight. She used her findings to help others understand the risk of flying a space shuttle into space.

She remembers walking into a room of nearly 200 hundred people and being the only female engineer in the room.



On her second day, LePoint recalls a man circling her in the hallway “as if she were a museum piece,” she says. And she remembers a few female executive assistants pulling her into the restroom, introducing themselves and sharing advice.

“They said, ‘Whatever you do, if you ever get flustered, if you ever get emotional, if you feel like crying, grab one of us and bring us over into the restroom, and we’ll talk with you so you can be calm out there.’ I thought they were joking,” LePoint says.

The bathroom “was the place for sanity,” LePoint says. Which is why she was particularly moved by the scene in the film where Taraji P. Henson’s character Katherine Johnson

was emotional about the half-mile distance to the dilapidated “colored bathroom.”

Also similar to a scene in *Hidden Figures*, LePoint recalls a time when a man tried to take credit for her six months of research data. But a female mentor practiced a rebuttal with LePoint, and just one month later, she delivered it successfully. “I realized my mentor had prepared me for this, and I said, ‘No, I feel fully prepared to give the information that I have solely researched.’ [The man] knew that he could not argue with that because it was my work. He said, ‘Are you sure? They’re going to eat you alive.’” Sent into preparation overdrive, LePoint says the experience helped her become a

“I saw women engineers cut their hair short and a lot of them wear really baggy clothes, and sometimes diminish the fact that they had a figure,” she says. “I always promised myself I was never going to do that, and I was going to be true to who I was, and I was going to make science exciting. I was going to always be a woman in this male world, and I wanted to own the fact that I was a woman.”

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strong leader and presenter. She was coined “the rocket science news reporter” and she became the youngest person to present information to NASA of that scale. LePoint says it was important for her to keep her sense of self intact during that time.

Today, LePoint is dedicated to empowering young people — especially women and people of color — to unleash their brainpower. She travels the country as a professional speaker, hosts her radio show *Answers Unleashed* and enjoys being a “hip” mathematics professor at Pasadena City College.

She says she hopes her story can inspire others, just as her *Hidden Figures* predecessors have inspired her.

“This movie is so powerful because it points the finger to me,” she says.

Photo by Airis Photography

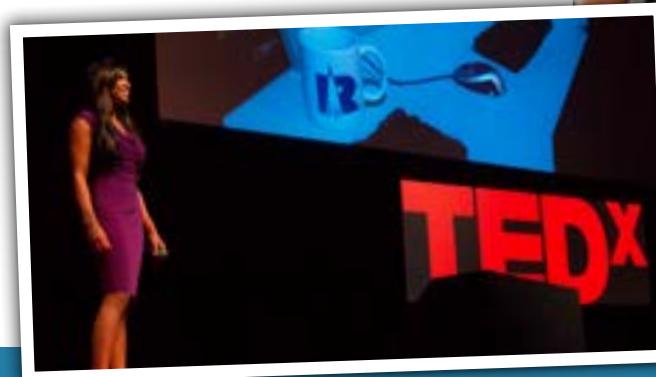


Photo by Auriel LePoint