

# Profiles

By Brian Gonzalez



## Robert Shelton

In April, Robert Shelton received the Employee of the Year Gold Award from the National Business and Disability Council.

The award recognizes personal achievements for recipients and makes corporations more aware that enhancing opportunities for people with disabilities makes good business sense, according to the council's award information.

However, this award means much more to Shelton, who serves as Learning Technologies Regional Center Project Manager. He thinks of it as cumulative recognition for his efforts, more like a lifetime achievement award.

"In periods in your life, you do a lot of work that is not recognized," Shelton said, adding that this award makes up for those times.

Shelton initially worked at JSC as a Co-op student in the Math/Physics Branch in the summers of 1971, 1972 and 1974. After completing his doctorate, Shelton was a professor at the University of Tennessee and Michigan Technological University. In 1987, he returned to JSC and has been here ever since. "Coming back here was like going back to graduate school," Shelton said. "I learned so much."

Born with congenital glaucoma, a condition involving increased pressure in the eye, Shelton experienced a dramatic change in his life around the time he turned 11. He lost the majority of his vision when a surgery to alleviate his condition went poorly.

Throughout elementary school, Shelton did not enjoy school. He found much of the work to be mundane. When he returned to school after losing his vision, however, he entered an entirely different world. An accommodating school administration made arrangements for Shelton to do more verbal work to facilitate learning with diminished sight.

This new way of working continued throughout high school and Shelton's career at Rice University, where he earned a bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate in mathematics. Throughout the years, JSC has been proactive in providing Shelton the support he needs to do his job. Even before screen readers and other assistive technology were implemented at NASA, the Center readily accommodated Shelton, even if it meant having someone read documents to him.

"NASA pioneered innovative ways to have disabled people contribute," Shelton said. "The agency was way out in front of Section 508."

Section 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act requires federal agencies to ensure that government electronic and information technology is accessible to employees and members of the public with disabilities.

Soon after additions and changes to Section 508 were implemented, Shelton was selected to assist in JSC's Section 508 compliance efforts. He serves as a representative to the NASA Section 508 Implementation Team. JSC was already doing what was necessary to provide accessibility, Shelton said. Section 508 just formalized the process. "In some way, it affects the way we all do business," Shelton said of Section 508.

Currently, Shelton works with his team to develop interactive learning tools for students and teachers. These programs are available online at [prime.jsc.nasa.gov](http://prime.jsc.nasa.gov). "I took the education project on as an extra effort," Shelton said. "It gradually grew to consume all of my time."

His team's latest project, ROVER Ranch, is an online simulation designed to give students insight into robotic engineering. Another project, Qwhiz, allows students to explore an online game-show type environment that quizzes them about various subjects. Qwhiz also gives teachers the ability to make up new Qwhiz games with the online system.

"In his work for learning technologies, Bob has been able to get people with very different backgrounds to both work together and use their individual strengths to accomplish some pretty impressive tasks," said Chris Culbert, Shelton's former supervisor and current chief of the Robotic Systems Technology Branch.



## Debra Johnson

During her 29-year career at JSC, Debra Johnson's strong work ethic has transformed the former cooperative education student into the Office of Procurement's Deputy Director.

"It goes without saying that hard work is a part of any successful career," she said. "Turning challenges into opportunities to become an expert in that area is what has made my career stand out."

Johnson came to JSC in 1973 as a business administration Co-op from Texas Southern University. Over the years, she worked her way up through the ranks of the Procurement Office. "The Center has really afforded me the opportunity for growth," she said.

Now, her hard work has paid off once more. On July 19, Johnson will receive the award for Corporate Responsibility at the Women of Color Government and Defense Technology Awards Conference in Washington, D.C.

The Corporate Responsibility Award recognizes a person working in government or defense who sparks commitments by an organization to support new opportunities for women and minorities in science and technology, according to application materials.

"I try to let people know that NASA is available for everybody," Johnson said. "It is an open society."

Johnson works with small and disadvantaged businesses through her role as the Center's Small Business Advisor and Small Disadvantaged Business Programs Lead.

"She has devoted herself unselfishly to be a guide and counselor to our organization," said Rhonda Cummings, vice president of Beststaff Technical Services.

Johnson believes mentorship is an important aspect of career development. "I've had different mentors at different levels," she said.

Mentoring is not just an activity for Johnson; it is a way of living. "My experiences are not my own but are there to share," Johnson said.

As she has climbed her way up the organizational ladder, Johnson has shared her experience with others to help them navigate the path to success.

Her advice is simple but important: "Find a mentor as soon as you can in your career and don't be afraid to seek different mentors as your career rises," Johnson said. "Some of the most influential people that I have met have not been directly in my career path."

She is a member of many committees and professional organizations, and she still finds opportunities to network through informal meetings, such as barbecues or sports.

Johnson is the JSC Acquisition Ombudsman, and she is a George M. Low Award evaluator. She also serves on the Traffic Appeals Board, the Exchange Council Scholarship Committee and the NASA Education Development Panel.

Johnson works to help others outside the JSC gates too. She serves as president of the Jack & Jill of America Greater Channel Chapter. Jack & Jill is an organization of mothers who seek to provide constructive educational, cultural, civic, recreational, social and service programs for children.

By reaching out to children in the inner city through church and organizations like Jack & Jill, Johnson exposes women and minorities to the opportunities available to them at NASA.

JSC is a place Johnson believes in and, after nearly 30 years of service, she still enjoys coming to work every day.

"I love working for NASA," Johnson said. "It is a thrill to be here."

## SPACE CENTER Roundup

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Managing Editor . . . . .Melissa Davis. . . . . [melissa.davis1@jsc.nasa.gov](mailto:melissa.davis1@jsc.nasa.gov)

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