

# The 40th Commemorative Anniversary Gala

## A JOURNEY OF INSPIRATION: Honoring **Dr. Ronald McNair's**

*Enduring Spirit of Education,  
Exploration, & Excellence!*



Saturday, January 31, 2026  
6:00PM

The ROB  
245 S. Church Street  
Lake City, SC 29560

## 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Observance of the Challenger Space Shuttle Disaster



Saturday, January 31, 2026

6:00 – 11:00 PM

PROGRAM

*Ms. Darci Strickland Presiding*

*Opening.....Ms. Sarah Gay, Chairwoman  
Ronald McNair Committee*

*Presentation of Colors.....Lake City High School JROTC  
National Anthem*

*Greetings.....Mayor Yamekia Robinson*

*Invocation & Blessing of the Food.....Rev. Louis Ashley, Pastor  
Wesley United Methodist Church*

*DINNER 6:30 PM - 8:00 PM*

*Roll Call of the Challenger Astronauts.....Retired Colonel Althea Watson and  
Committee Member LaVelle Robinson*

The STS-51L Crew: Francis R. "Dick" Scobee – Commander, Michael J. Smith – Pilot,  
Ronald E. McNair – Mission Specialist, Ellison S. Onizuka – Mission Specialist,  
Judith A. Resnik – Mission Specialist, Gregory B. Jarvis – Payload Specialist, and  
Sharon Christa McAuliffe – Payload Specialist, "Teacher in Space Project"

*Introduction of Speaker.....Ms. Rebecca Elliott  
Banquet Chair*

*Speaker.....Ms. Vanessa Wyche  
Director, NASA's Johnson Space Center*

*Tributes.....Mrs. Cheryl McNair, Widow of Dr. McNair;  
Carl McNair, Brother of Dr. McNair; and Eric McNair, Brother of Dr. McNair*

*Special Recognition & Closing Remarks.....Ms. Sarah Gay*

*Benediction..... Rev. Louis Ashley*

*DANCING & SOCIALIZING until 11 pm  
Level 10 Band & Justin Hanna, DJ*



## **National Aeronautics and Space Administration**

### **Vanessa E. Wyche**

Director, NASA's Johnson Space Center



Vanessa E. Wyche is the director of NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, home to America's astronaut corps, Mission Control Center, International Space Station, Orion, and Gateway programs, and its more than 11,000 civil service and contractor employees. Her responsibilities included a broad range of human spaceflight activities, including development and operation of human spacecraft and NASA astronaut selection and training.

Previously, Wyche was the acting associate administrator of NASA, serving as the senior advisor to NASA acting administrator Sean Duffy. Wyche led the agency's 10 center directors as well as the mission directorate associate administrators at NASA Headquarters in Washington. She acted as the agency's chief operating officer for more than 18,000 employees and an annual budget of more than \$24 billion.

Wyche also oversaw NASA Johnson's activities supporting the commercialization of low Earth orbit, supporting the agency's needs following the transition from the International Space Station in 2030, and led the center's programs supporting the exploration of the Moon and Mars, including surface system capabilities for human and commercial robotic missions, as well as simulated missions for crews on Mars.

During her 35-year career, Wyche has held several other leadership roles including Johnson's deputy center director, director of Exploration Integration and Science Directorate, flight manager of several Space Shuttle Program missions, and executive officer in the Office of the Administrator, as well as additional center-level technical and program organizations.

A native of South Carolina, Wyche earned a Bachelor of Science in Engineering and Master of Science in Bioengineering from Clemson University and was inducted into the Thomas Green Clemson Academy of Engineers and Scientists in 2019. She received an honorary Doctor of Science degree from Coastal Carolina University in 2022 as well as an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Texas Southern University in 2024.

Wyche is a member of the National Academy of Engineering. She has numerous awards and recognitions, notably the Presidential Rank Award, two NASA Outstanding Leadership Medals, and two NASA Achievement Medals, and she is an AIAA Associate Fellow.

Wyche is a passionate promoter of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), and serves as a member of American Institute of Physics Foundation board of trustees, Clemson University's College of Engineering, Computing, and Applied Sciences advisory board, and is a past chair of the Space Center Houston board of directors.

Wyche is married to George Wyche Jr. Esq, and has one son, George Wyche III.

For more information about Johnson Space Center, visit: <http://www.nasa.gov/johnson>

# *Message from the Chairwoman*

## 40th Anniversary Observance of the Space Shuttle Challenger Disaster

*Dear Community Members,*

Welcome to the 40th Anniversary Observance of the Space Shuttle Challenger Disaster. Today, we gather in remembrance and unity as we honor the lives of Dr. Ronald Ervin McNair and the entire Challenger crew. Your presence—along with the steadfast support of the Lake City community and surrounding areas—fills me with profound gratitude. I am also deeply thankful for the unwavering love and encouragement of my family. The Ron McNair Committee was first established in 1984 to celebrate Dr. McNair's historic journey into space. Following the 1986 tragedy, the committee reorganized with renewed purpose: to ensure that his legacy of courage, brilliance, and service would continue to inspire future generations. I am humbled to serve as the family representative, a role I accepted at the request of my aunt, Lela.

Dr. McNair's vision remains a guiding light—rooted in resilience, education, and the belief that every child deserves the opportunity to reach beyond the horizon. What began as a hope to send local students to NASA became a reality through the dedication of Ronald's wife, Cheryl. In June 2023, during a visit to the Astronaut Memorial Grove at NASA's Johnson Space Center, I learned of Aunt Pearl's heartfelt wish: that Ronald would return home to inspire the young people of Lake City.



Sarah M. Gay

Standing at his memorial tree, that wish became a mission. Thanks to Florence School District 3, ten students and three staff members traveled to NASA, fulfilling Cheryl's vision and honoring Aunt Pearl's dream.

Today, that dream continues to flourish through the work of the Ron McNair Committee. Our commitment to STEM education remains strong, supported by the dedication of our four pilots—Qualario Brown, Cedric Davis, Craig Harrison, and Taj Troy as well as our 5K health initiatives and academic scholarships help us uplift and empower the next generation. It is a privilege to serve with the RMC members as we nurture the aspirations of our youth.

Thank you once again for your presence, your support, and your heartfelt well wishes. Together, we will continue to look toward the stars and carry forward Dr. McNair's enduring legacy of excellence, exploration, and education.

Sincerely,

*Sarah M. Gay*

Chairwoman  
Ron McNair Committee

# The Ron McNair Committee Members



Sarah Gay  
Chair of The Ron McNair Committee



Paula Morris  
Vice Chair



Janice Eaddy  
Treasurer



Mary Anna Christmas  
Secretary



Rebecca Elliott  
Gala - Chair  
Budget - Vice Chair



Edward Fulmore  
Treasurer Emeritus



Anthony Wilson  
5K - Chair



Althea Dale Watson  
Financial/Budget - Chair



Joanne Brown  
Bylaws - Chair



Darryl Tyrone Brown



Gloria Graham Boyd  
Bylaws - Vice Chair



Dr. Cheryl A. Fortner



Deon Oneil Esquire



Lavelle Robinson



Justin Hanna



Yamekia Robinson  
Scholarship Committee - Chair



Gloria Tisdale  
Previous RMC Chair  
for 20 Years



Clyde Bess  
Previous RMC 5K Chair  
for 20 Years



Brenda Montgomery



Estelle Singletary McLean



Kendra Scott



Queen Wallace

## Dr. Ronald E. McNair Biography

Ronald Erwin McNair was born on October 21, 1950, in Lake City, South Carolina, to Carl and Peral McNair. He attended North Carolina A&T State University, where he graduated magna cum laude with a B.S. Degree in physics in 1971. McNair then enrolled in the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he earned his Ph.D. Degree in Physics in 1976, at the age of 25.

Dr. McNair soon became a recognized expert in laser physics while working as a staff physicist with Hughes Research Laboratory. NASA selected him for the space shuttle program in 1978 and assigned him as a mission specialist aboard the 1984 flight of the shuttle Challenger.



Besides his academic achievements, Dr. McNair received three honorary doctorate degrees and many fellowships and commendations. These included Presidential Scholar, 1961-71; Ford Foundation Fellow, 1971-74; National Fellowship Fund Fellow, 1974-75; named Omega Psi Phi Scholar of the year, 1975; Distinguished National Scientist, National Society of Black Professional Engineers, 1979; and the Friend of Freedom Award, 1981, as well as many others. He also held a fifth-degree black belt in karate and was an accomplished jazz saxophonist. He was married to Cheryl McNair and had two children, Reginald Ervin McNair and Joy Cheray McNair.

After he died in the Challenger space shuttle accident in January 1986, members of Congress provided funding for the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, dedicated to the high standard of achievements that Dr. McNair's life represented. The purpose of this TRiO program is to increase the attainment of doctoral degrees by students from underrepresented segments of society.<sup>1</sup> This year, there are 197 McNair TRiO programs funded to serve 5,403 students from first generation, low-income, and underrepresented backgrounds. The total federal funding for McNair programs is over \$55 million and supports programs in 47 states and Puerto -Rico.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. McNair's legacy is visible in the accomplishments of TRiO McNair alumni, like NASA astronaut **José M. Hernández**<sup>3</sup> whose life story is showcased in the film *A Million Miles Away*. A few other notable TRiO McNair alumni are<sup>4</sup> **Nikema Williams** (first African-American woman to chair the Georgia Democratic party), **Sarah Smarsh** (*New York Times* best-selling author), **Cornelius Griggs** (one of the largest construction contractors in the Midwest), **Tara Ruttle** (NASA alumnus and Chief Scientist for Orbital Reef), and **Aaron Rahsaan Thomas** (producer and screenwriter, known for "S.W.A.T.," "CSI: NY," and "Friday Night Lights").

The TRiO McNair program is one of many ways Dr. McNair's name and legacy are evident throughout our nation and world. To learn more about Dr. McNair's life and legacy, please visit the Ronald E. McNair Life History Center here in Lake City (<https://www.ronaldemcnairlifehistorycenter.org/>).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-higher-education/federal-trio-programs/ronald-e-mcnair-postbaccalaureate-achievement-program>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/mcnfinal2025-113007.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://coenet.org/news-impact/blog/a-million-miles-away-watch-party-with-jose-hernandez/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://coenet.org/trio-alumni-accomplishments/>

# Remembering the Life and Honoring the Legacy of Dr. Ronald E. McNair

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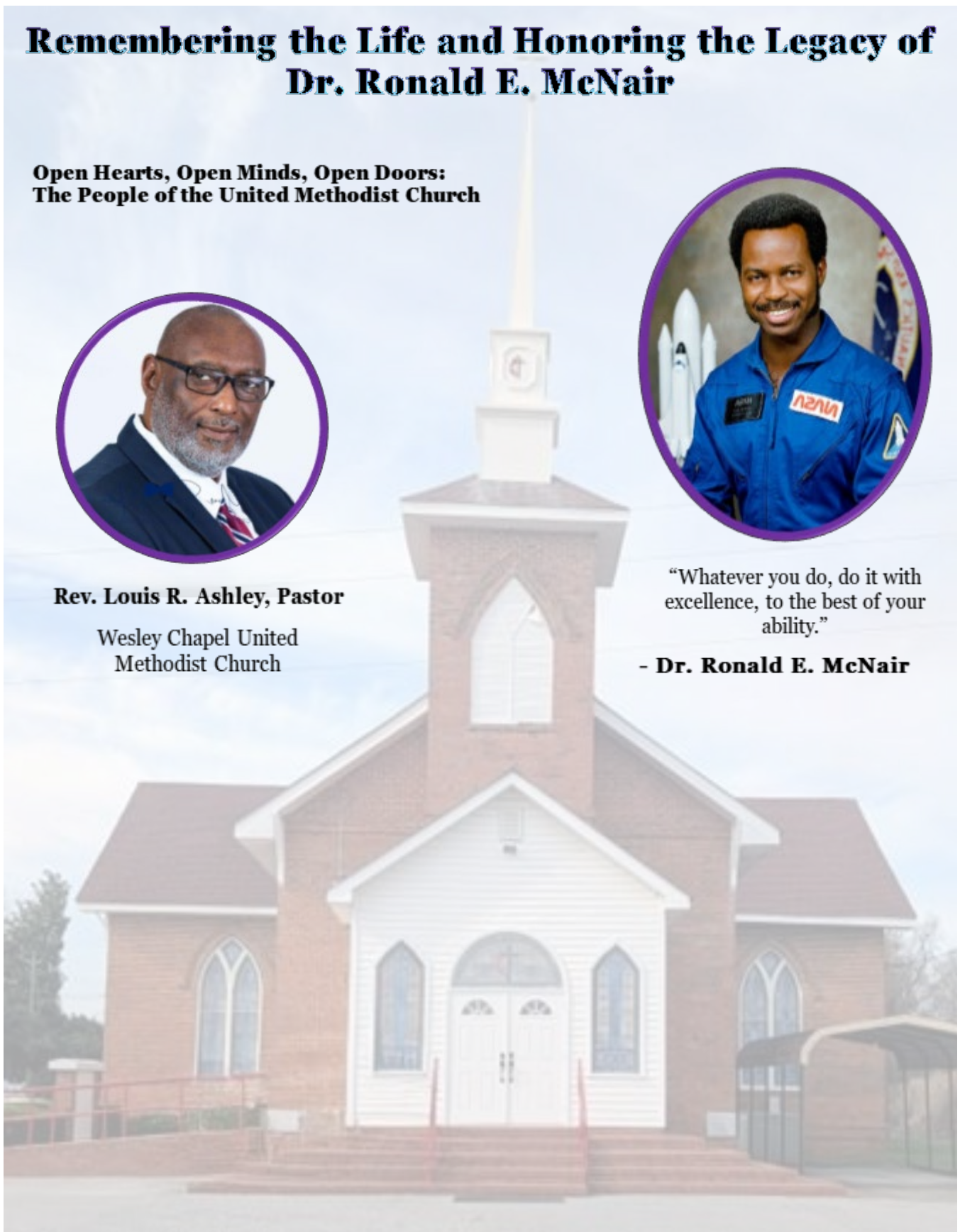
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**- Dr. Ronald E. McNair**



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## ***A Letter from Mayor Yamekia Robinson***

As Mayor of Lake City, South Carolina, it is a great honor to join our community in commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Challenger Space Shuttle Disaster and celebrating the extraordinary life of our hometown hero, Dr. Ronald E. McNair. This moment invites us to reflect on the remarkable legacy of a man whose journey began right here at home.

Lake City holds Dr. McNair's story close to its heart. His journey began right here walking the halls of Carver High School, growing up in our neighborhoods, and pushing past barriers that once seemed impossible to do. He found encouragement from teachers, mentors, and family members who recognized his brilliance long before the world did.

Today, his legacy continues to live in Lake City in ways both visible and deeply felt. It lives in the students who attend schools bearing his name, in the scholars who benefit from the McNair programs across the nation, and in every young person who looks at his story and sees proof that greatness can rise from small towns like ours. It lives in the pride we feel each time we speak his name and in the responsibility we carry to keep his spirit alive.

On this anniversary, we stand together as a community shaped by Dr. McNair's example and strengthened by the values he carried into the world. His life reminds us that even from a small town like Lake City, a spirit of determination can rise to heights once thought unreachable. As we honor him today, may we continue building a community where every child feels seen, supported, and encouraged to pursue their own extraordinary path. Dr. McNair showed us what is possible and it is our responsibility to keep that possibility alive for generations to come.

With deepest respect and gratitude,

The Honorable Mayor Yamekia Robinson  
Lake City, South Carolina





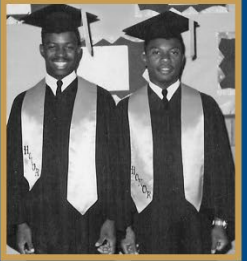
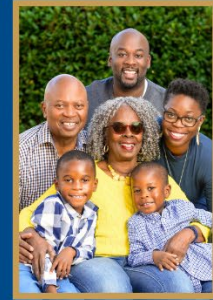
## 40th Commemorative Anniversary

### Honoring Dr. Ronald E. McNair A Legacy of Inspiration and Courage

From Lake City to the stars, Dr. McNair's legacy reminds us to dream boldly and rise above every barrier. We honor his life, his sacrifice, and the future his vision continues to shape.

- City of Lake City, SC





On this 40th Commemorative Anniversary, the McNair and Brown families honor the life and legacy of Dr. Ronald E. McNair—a beloved brother, husband, father, uncle and friend who continues to inspire generations "To a Reach for Stars". For My Brother, Ronald... Forty years later, there is never a day that passes when I don't say your name. You are deeply loved, by the Lake City community, your family, friends, your Carver High classmates, your NC A&T and MIT family, church members, and your NASA colleagues. Your life continues to live through tens of thousands of Ronald McNair Scholars who proudly bear your name and carry your legacy forward. Through them, you continue to inspire students, teachers, scientists, engineers, and dreamers for generations to come.

You remain present in every life you touched and every path you helped open. My heart is full knowing that your purpose did not end, it multiplied. I am forever your brother, your best man, and your friend.

~ Carl McNair & Family



### Honoring the Legacy of Dr. Ronald E. McNair

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the Lake City Ron McNair Committee, including both past and present members, for their dedicated work and tireless efforts. Their commitment has been instrumental in keeping Ronald's spirit, memory, and legacy alive and thriving in Lake City, Florence School District 3, Florence County, the state of South Carolina, and across the country.

Ronald always encouraged others to dream big and reach for the stars. Reflecting on everything Ronald achieved in his life stands as a powerful testament to these beliefs, as well as his unwavering hard work and relentless drive to reach for the stars. Through STEM programs and the ongoing efforts of the Ron McNair Committee, Ronald's legacy continues to inspire hope among local youth. Their work shows young people that with hard work and dedication, they too can achieve their goals and aspire to greatness.

*Eric McNair & Family*



# Cheryl McNair



Dear Supporters, Friends, and Family,

What a momentous occasion to present memories of a legacy that so inspired a nation and a world. This legacy elevated the importance of education and stressed personal responsibility in the pursuit of one's life station to our youth. My late husband, Dr. Ronald Ervin McNair, spoke in State Houses in support of the betterment of education, as well as in many schools to youth across the nation and the world. His message to the youth was to encourage them to dream high, work hard to the best of their ability, reach their goals, and be determined in the pursuit of achievement and education.

I feel Ron would be very pleased by such an event honoring him and his legacy in his hometown. When being honored at the University of South Carolina, he said, "To travel into space onboard the Rolls-Royce of space travel at 17,500 miles per hour is a great thrill, and to come home and to be honored among friends and family is of equal magnitude for which I would be eternally grateful."

My family—Reginald, Joy, and I—are immensely grateful to all supporters, family, and friends. Moreover, we would like to give special recognition to the members of the Dr. Ronald E. McNair Committee here in Lake City, South Carolina. The committee has worked tirelessly and diligently for forty-two years, beginning with the celebration of Ron's first flight into space. They have remained committed and dedicated to this goal ever since. The committee has orchestrated a weekly memorial every January 28, the erection of a prominent Ronald McNair statue and marble wall, the placement of the gravesite in a beautiful pool of water next to the statue, the renovation of the old Lake City library, and a yearly walkathon towards the creation of the Dr. Ronald E. McNair Life History Center.

For all of these honors and this special memorial occasion, Reginald, Joy, and I send a heartfelt thank you and much appreciation to all.

With much gratitude,

*Cheryl McNair*



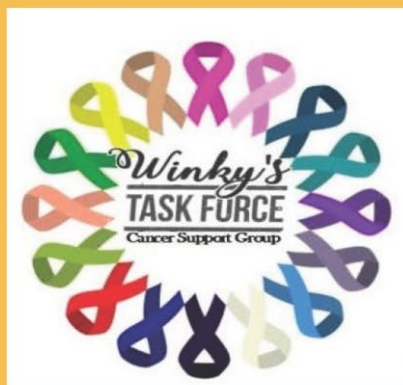
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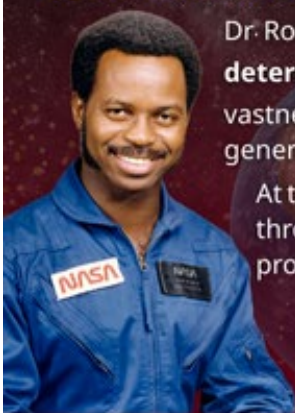


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*Dr. Ronald E. McNair*



Dr. Ronald E. McNair showed the world what is possible when **curiosity**, **determination**, and **education** converge. From a small-town classroom to the vastness of space, his life redefined boundaries and expanded the horizon for generations who followed.

At the Moore School, our commitment lies in creating a lasting impact through education, fostering a community that values access, and providing opportunities through active community engagement.

**The Office of Access, Opportunity, and Community Engagement** honors Dr. Ronald E. McNair as we continue our mission of changing lives and trajectories through education.



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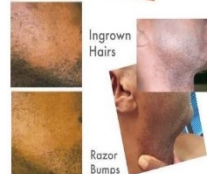
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## ***A Message from TRiO McNair Professionals***

One of the lasting legacies of the life of Dr. McNair is the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, commonly known as TRIO McNair Scholars. Since the first programs began in 1989, thousands of first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students have been able to fulfill their dreams of attending graduate school, producing cutting edge research, and earning doctoral degrees. Just like Dr. McNair, these scholars are changing the world through their scholarly work. In addition, this program has given the opportunity for hundreds of dedicated professionals to mentor and train these young scientists as they pursue their goals and to work together to ensure that every student has the opportunity to excel. The McNair Scholars program truly embodies the legacy of Dr. Ronald McNair.

**Dr. Kim Rosfeld, President**  
**McNair Association of Professionals**



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The McNair Association of Professionals (MAP) is the representative body for TRIO professionals from colleges, universities, and agencies that host the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. MAP is dedicated to fostering and promoting high standards of professional practices and advocating for McNair Scholars Programs at the national level by creating opportunities for educational personnel and participants (students and alumni) with professional development and support. (Downloaded 1/20/2026 from <https://maop14.wildapricot.org>)

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## Dr. Cedric Rivers & Family

### Remembering & Honoring the Life and Legacy of Dr. Ronald E. McNair

A Journey of Excellence, Exploration,  
and Education!

With heartfelt admiration, Dr. Rivers,  
Keisha, Lauren, and Logan celebrate  
the brilliance, courage, and enduring  
impact of Dr. Ronald E. McNair, whose  
life continues to inspire generations.



## *Recognition & Appreciation*

to the Staff and Students of

### **FLORENCE SCHOOL DISTRICT 3**

For their long-term partnership to support and realize the legacy of  
Dr. McNair through the annual day of recognition  
and initiatives that focus on STEM education.



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