

Dr. Betty Wright Harris: Master Chemist



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Betty Wright Harris was born on July 29th, 1940 to parents Henry Hudson "Jake" Wright and Legertha Evelyn Thompson Wright, in Ouachita Parish, Monroe, Louisiana. She was one of eleven children raised on the farm her parents worked on until they were able to buy the farm. Harris was a brilliant child and even enrolled into Southern University at the age of sixteen; her mother Legertha was a school teacher and taught her children the value of gaining an education. At the age of nineteen Harris graduated from Southern University with a bachelor's degree in science, she next moved to Atlanta, GA to attend Atlanta University, she would go on to graduate with a master's degree in chemistry. After earning her bachelor's and master's degrees Harris was employed by Mississippi Valley State University, Southern University and Colorado College as an assistant professor of chemistry and mathematics. Harris met and married a man named Alloyd A. Harris and they would have three children.

Harris began completing doctoral level chemistry classes at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee before accepting a position to work at IBM. She next accepted a position to work as a visiting staff member at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) located in New Mexico. She

had a desire to further her learning and enrolled in the University of New Mexico, graduating in 1973 with her Ph.D. in chemistry. Her dissertation titled "Reactions of 2-Aminopyridine with Picryl Halides" was so prolific that it was published in *The Journal of Heterocyclic Chemistry*. While working at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) her concentrations were explosives and nuclear weapons, cleanup of hazardous materials and environmental restoration. She also gave much attention to explosives detection, characterization of insensitive high explosives, synthesis, sensitivity of weathered high explosives, and safing liquids. Harris was known for using the local Girl Scouts to get young black girls interested in chemistry, she also developed a Girl Scouts badge for chemistry.

Harris' brilliance was on full display during her time at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, she gained a wealth of knowledge which led to her creating her invention the TATB Spot Test or U.S. Patent number 4,618,452. In 2002, Harris retired from the Los Alamos National Laboratory and took a position as the chief of chemical technology managing technical laboratories, and investigated cold-end corrosion of super alloys, for Solar Turbine Inc. Harris also worked as a certified document reviewer for the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Classification. She had access to data that was considered "restricted" due to a special clearance called a "Q" clearance. In 1999, she received a governor's award and was considered one of the most outstanding women in New Mexico. She was the president of the New Mexico Business and Professional Women's Organization, Women in Science and Engineering, the American Society for the Advancement of Science, and was also a member of the American Chemical Society for fifty years. Harris is one of the world's leading experts in explosives, her TATB Spot Test has helped the U.S. military and The Department of Homeland Security to detect different types of explosives. Her brilliance was nurtured early in her life by her parents, her nurturing led to her being able to literally revolutionize the world of chemistry. Dr. Betty Wright Harris, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJ888ske9Cw>

References:

On the Shoulders of Giants

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<http://ontheshoulders1.com>

<http://www.black-inventor.com/Dr-Betty-Harris.asp>

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