Lunar and Planetary Lab History is Told By Those Who Made It

University Communications
December 2008

Scientists who have been pivotal in the life of The University of Arizona's remarkable Lunar and Planetary Laboratory over the past five decades are also talented raconteurs.

Their stories are compiled in a new history project, excerpts of which are published on the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory [1], or LPL, Web site.

LPL Director Michael J. Drake recruited UA undergraduate Melissa Lamberton to undertake the project as a Space Grant intern in the fall of 2006.

"I wanted to capture the history of LPL while most of its founders and its earliest students were still with us," Drake said. "LPL is a flagship research and teaching department on campus. It is important to understand how a great organization was started and how it evolved to its present status."

If there are any takeaway messages from the history, Drake added, it's that a great organization can have a great deal of fun, and that people with vision will make great things happen.

The LPL was born when Russians launched Sputnik and Americans began their race to the moon. The lab began as a handful of researchers derided as members of the "Loony Lab" and evolved into the unique, world-class planetary sciences laboratory it is today.

"One of the motivations for doing this project was to record the memories of the senior staff members for posterity â€“ people like Ewen Whitaker, who was vital to the Ranger missions," Lamberton said.

The Ranger series was the first U.S. attempt to obtain close-up images of the lunar surface. The Ranger spacecraft were designed to fly straight down towards the moon and send images back until the moment of impact.

Lamberton, a senior majoring in environmental sciences and creative writing, is also education coordinator for the UA-led Phoenix Mars Scout Mission. She spent more than 100 hours interviewing 55 faculty and former faculty, staff, students and alumni for the history project.

Yisrael Spinoza, who designed and maintains LPL's High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment, orHiRISE [2], Web site, designed the history Web pages. He selected images from 100 historical photos and opted for a book-type layout that breaks the text into short, readable sections.

"The lunar lab is unique because it was founded at a time when planetary science didn't exist," Lamberton said. "The early staff were astronomers, but they discovered that to study rocky bodies like the moon, they needed very different tools and techniques. So LPL is not only a leader in planetary science, the lab actually helped create the field."

"I've come away from this project with a great respect for LPL faculty and staff. I've gotten to meet incredible people who are passionate about what they do, whether it is teaching or running spacecraft experiments or studying meteorites in a lab. Many of them have seen a new world for the very first time, from the first close-up pictures of the moon to Voyager's views of the outer planets," Lamberton said. "In every case, the person I interviewed was so enthusiastic about that moment of discovery. One of the things I wanted to capture in this project was their excitement at finding themselves poised on the edge of a brand new world."

Lamberton said she thought a lot about the interviews when the Phoenix spacecraft landed on Mars on May 25. "It was my own moment of seeing a new landscape revealed," she said.

Links
[1] http://www.lpl.arizona.edu [2] http://hirise.lpl.arizona.edu/