

UA Remembers Laurel Wilkening

University Communications
June 2019

Laurel L. Wilkening ^[1], a renowned planetary scientist who served the University of Arizona in several academic leadership roles and was one of the driving forces behind the formation of the women's studies program, passed away on June 4 at the age of 74.

Wilkening achieved a number of firsts: She served as the first female director of the UA Lunar and Planetary Laboratory, the first person to serve as dean of sciences and the first woman to serve as a vice president. She also was the first woman to serve as provost at the University of Washington and the first woman to serve as chancellor at the University of California, Irvine.

Wilkening began her career at LPL in 1973, joining the faculty as an assistant professor in planetary sciences. From 1981 to 1983, she served as LPL director and department head of planetary sciences before moving on to other influential administrative positions, including service as dean of the Graduate College from 1987 to 1989 and also as vice president for research, vice provost, and acting dean of sciences.

An expert on comets and meteorites, Wilkening served on many national commissions and committees related to the U.S. space program, including terms as vice chair of the National Commission on Space, vice chair of NASA's Advisory Committee on the Future of the U.S. Space Program and chair of the Vice President's Space Policy Advisory Board.

LPL Department Administrator **Lynn Lane**, who served as Wilkening's executive assistant during her tenure as LPL director, said she remembers Wilkening "as an outstanding scientist and administrator who treated those she interacted with fairly and equally."

"She had this beautiful and infectious smile. She was witty, and she always seemed happy," Lane said. "I especially remember how encouraging she was to really everybody, from the staff to the scientists to the students. She always encouraged students to pursue their interests and persist through the challenges they faced. Everybody liked Laurel, and I loved working for her. She was truly wonderful, a special person."

From the beginning of her faculty career, Wilkening was instrumental in the development of women's studies at the University of Arizona, teaming with **Myra Dinnerstein**, now a professor emeritus, to advocate for creating an academic department. She served on the Women's Studies Advisory Council, which was formed to generate financial and political support for the women's studies department. Wilkening endowed the Myra Dinnerstein International Travel Fund for Dissertation Research on Women and made the lead monetary gift in support of the Women's Plaza of Honor, where she was honored with a gift by her husband, Godfrey Sill.

"Laurel was the most encouraging person I have ever met," said **Dolores Hill**, a senior research specialist at LPL who was among the first hires when Wilkening was LPL's director. "After meeting with her for only a few minutes, I felt like I could conquer anything. She was an intelligent, sharp, extraordinary scientist and administrator who could cut through all the fluff and quickly get to the meat of a matter."

One of the highlights of her life, Hill added, was being able to thank Wilkening and present her with a certificate announcing the official naming of an asteroid in Wilkening's honor. Discovered by the UA [Catalina Sky Survey](#) ^[2], the object's initial designation was changed from "1999 YV 22" to "(75562) Wilkening."

Wilkening was born in Richland, Washington, in 1944 and raised in Socorro, New Mexico, where her father was a physicist at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. She had a passion for science, earning a bachelor's degree at Reed College and a doctorate from the University of California, San Diego in 1970.

Steve Larson, an LPL senior staff scientist and co-investigator of the Catalina Sky Survey, remembered taking the first course Wilkening taught at LPL when he was a graduate student.

"We learned about all the different kinds of meteorites," Larson said, "For the final exam, Laurel came in with a dozen samples, and we had to identify them. Three of them, he said, were not meteorites but "meteor-wrongs" – rocks of Earthly origin that fool the untrained eye.

"She was just very good with people," he added, "always positive, with a smile on her face, and truly a wonderful and generous person all around."

LPL Director **Tim Swindle** credits Wilkening for her visionary and strong role in expanding planetary science from its heavy focus on telescopic observations to the multidisciplinary field it is today.

He remembered Wilkening "as a powerful, groundbreaking figure, besides being a neat person." Although their tenures

didn't overlap, Swindle said he came to greatly value her mentorship through the years.

"When I became director of LPL, Laurel told me that to be good at a job like that, you had to be OK with other people getting the credit when you were successful, rather than you, because your job was to help other people succeed," Swindle said. "I thought it was not only marvelous advice, but also said a lot about the way she looked at administrative jobs."

After Wilkening retired in 1998, she remained active as a board member for the Planetary Society, the UA Commission on the Status of Women and various environmental groups. She loved the natural world of the Sonoran Desert and was an accomplished birder.

A memorial service was held on June 12. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the [Alzheimer's Association](#) [3].

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Links

[1] <https://www.lpl.arizona.edu/about/history/department-heads-directors> [2] <https://catalina.lpl.arizona.edu/> [3] <https://www.alz.org/>