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Serving the KU
Astronomy and Space
community across
all space/time
coordinates.

Issue No. 4

space/time

Welcome to the fourth issue of **space/time**, the KU Astronomy & Space newsletter. This has been a busy semester for everyone here, with plenty of activities. The Dean of the College, physics professor Arash Mafi, was recently promoted to Provost (#2 position at KU) – he helped jump-start our ongoing efforts for a new observatory building (on which, more in the next issue). Prof. Betsy Mills has been working on the “PRIMA” space telescope proposal, whose fate NASA will decide in the coming months. Community telescope-viewing & planetarium shows continue to attract public interest and attendance; the Society for Physics Students contributed to numerous outreach activities; and we celebrated Pluto Day with hands-on community activities, as part of the build-up to the 100th anniversary of its discovery. Read on for more!



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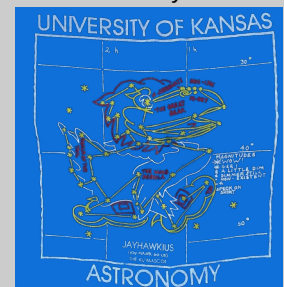
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KU students ran another epic PALOOZA (Physics & Astronomy LOcally OrganiZed Assembly), at which over 50 undergrad and grad students (some shown above) presented their latest research work.

Undergrad Lucciana Caceres Holgado received the Marian Rose Scholarship: \$15,000 for her exoplanet research and engagement in the physical sciences community. She also won the \$1,000 Ad Astra Kansas Foundation Award.

Three astro majors won KU Undergrad Research Awards: Joey Discavage & Terry Mechem for astronomy research, and Isabella Estes for physics work.

Four KU astronomers won national 3-year graduate fellowships (GRFPs): students Michael Wieber, Owen Zafuta, Kai Smith, and post-bacc researcher Nathan Shaw.

Graduate student Maleah Rhem won the Graduate Presentation Award in Astronomy at the 2025 NSBP/HSHP Conference.

Postdoc Dr. Bren Backhaus won the KU Postdoctoral Researcher Award for her extragalactic work.

Postdoc Dr. Hayley Beltz won the competitive national NASA Hubble Fellowship Program prize, which will fund her for three years at KU.

Prof. Allison Kirkpatrick was named KU's Provost Faculty Fellow, where she will work part-time with other departments and campus leaders.



Student Profile:
Lucciana Caceres Hogado (BS `27):

An eclipse passing through Peru, my home country, was the first time I thought about astronomy. Out of curiosity, I turned to books, documentaries, and science enthusiasts to learn more. At first, I thought this curiosity would be just a short-lived hobby. Yet, seven years later, it has only grown stronger.

I came to KU to deepen my understanding of science, and the past three years have confirmed that decision. I did not know I would meet such brilliant classmates and professors who have taught me an astonishing amount, for which I am very grateful.

Being an international student can limit opportunities, but with persistence, and thanks to the

knowledge and connections I've built, I worked with Prof. Alice Bean constructing electronic links for the CMS experiment at CERN. Last year, I traveled to Chile for a Research Program at one of NOIRLab's astronomy sites. There, I began studying an exoplanet's atmospheric makeup through high-resolution optical spectroscopy.

Outside the classroom and lab, I enjoy traveling and photography, both of which connect deeply with my love for science. Traveling allows me to experience new cultures and perspectives, while photography helps me capture the beauty of the world and, at times, the night sky.

These experiences—combined with what I've learned from classes and mentors—have inspired me to pursue graduate school, which I will begin after graduating in 2027.

MEET THE STUDENTS

Student Profile:
Curtis McLennan (PhD `28):

I am a 3rd-year Ph.D. Student in the astroparticle physics group. I came to KU to do physics because the environment of the department seemed very supportive (it is) and because of how much amazing research is happening here! I work on a new experiment called the Radar Echo Telescope (RET). We set up a radar system in the ice sheet of Greenland and monitored for signals off the short-lived plasma induced by a cosmic ray. To me, this research combines the best parts of a telescope and a

particle accelerator. I was able to assist in deploying this experiment, which was one of the coolest experiences of my life. We spent about 2 weeks in the Arctic Circle drilling boreholes, collecting data on ice properties, and debugging the instrument. Then over the course of the summer, we collected data from about 100,000 cosmic ray events and are analyzing the data now to search for radar signals.

I expect to graduate sometime in 2028 (fingers crossed), but still don't know what I want to be when I grow up. I love sharing how amazing physics can be, so I am considering finding a



teaching position at a liberal arts college. I love being outside, and backcountry hiking and rock climbing are some of my favorite activities, though opportunities for these are sparse in Kansas, so I spend my spare time tinkering with random projects at home and playing volleyball.

[ed.: Curtis is also one of the department's recipients of the Self Graduate Fellowship, KU's top prize fellowship award for graduate students!]



Reunion!

In January current and past members of the department met up in Phoenix, Arizona at the annual AAS conference. Fifteen or so department alumni (with degrees spanning many decades) met to chat, reminisce, catch up, and generally talk about astronomy and related topics. Emeritus Professors Shawl and Baringer, who live in Arizona, also dropped in to say hello to everyone. Refreshments were generously provided by Torry Crass (thanks Torry!), and a good time was had by all.

Interested in a KU reunion in your area? Reach out – we'd love to talk about how we could organize something & make it happen.

KU Astronomy Reunion

Monday, Jan 5th, 2026
Phoenix, AZ



Alumni Profiles

KU Astro & Space alums find their way to all corners of the Earth – and occasionally even beyond! Some stay in academia while many others venture out into the real world. To keep in touch with us, please:

- **Send** us all your latest successes and adventures at work or at home. (send to ianc@ku.edu).
- **Share** with us your latest email and mailing address.
- **Join** our LinkedIn group "[University of Kansas Astronomy Students, Alumni, and Friends.](#)"

And finally, remind your fellow alums to check in with us, too!

Scott Randle (BS `87):

"I graduated in Astronomy and I worked with Drs Bruce Twarog and Barbara Anthony-Twarog along with Dr. Shawl during my undergraduate studies. I also taught the astronomy lab class as an undergraduate student. The class was held in the lab area at the top of Lindley Hall where we utilized the various telescopes. I ended up getting my MS in Aerospace Engineering and worked at Cessna/Textron Aviation for 29 years. I am currently a professor at Wichita State University teaching Aerospace Engineering."

Ramona & Robert Kessell (PhDs `87):

We bought a house in Overland Park a year ago and are renovating and expanding before moving there. We are both retired - Bob from Naval Research Lab and Mona from NASA - but we recently got lured back for part time work. Some years ago Mona served on the Alumni board and was chair. She has been writing a memoir about KU graduate school, which is nearly done and being edited. She has lately been pulled off into other tasks: e.g., a recently accepted paper in JGR and another about to be submitted as contributing author.

Paul Fieseler (BS `88):

"I am currently the Chief Engineer for NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter. Other roles include Flight Director and various Spacecraft Systems roles on other missions at JPL including the Galileo mission to Jupiter, the Dawn mission to Vesta and Ceres, and the Psyche mission to an all-metal asteroid. After graduating from KU, I worked in Space Shuttle Mission Control for 5 years and then served as a Peace Corps science teacher in the Kingdom of Tonga. I currently have one son, one wife, one cat and one sailboat.

Thresa Kelly (BS `23):

"I got my first paper published. *Accretion History of AGN: A Multiwavelength Comparison of X-ray and Infrared Selected Active Galactic Nuclei* is now officially up on the Astrophysical Journal. I started this project when I did my REU at the University of Hawaii back in 2022. I've been working on this project since then (adding new mentors, including KU Prof. Allison Kirkpatrick)... and now it is complete!"

Randall Splinter (PhD `95):

"After leaving KU I spent 2 years at the Center for Computational Sciences at the University of Kentucky. In 1997 I was hired by Hewlett-Packard to support their technical server business and then a few years later joined their High Performance Computing (HPC) team. I left HP in 2013 and moved to DDN and supported parallel filesystems for HPC customers. In 2018 I joined Mellanox and 2 years later Mellanox was acquired by NVIDIA. I am currently a networking subject matter expert and support InfiniBand, Ethernet and NVLink networking technologies for enterprise and higher education customers for AI and HPC workloads. Since 2021, I and my wife live in the Lawrence area."

Torry Crass:

Was recently awarded the "Order of Thor," presented for significant contributions to the military cyber profession, at the very first meeting of the South Carolina chapter of the Military Cyber Professionals Association in Charleston, SC.

Ray Murray (BS `89):

"After KU I joined the Mirror Lab at U. of Arizona. The MMT and Magellan 6.5 meter telescopes were key projects, but my favorite castings were the 8.4 meter mirrors for the Large Binocular Telescope. For the last 20 years, I have served as a Digital Projects Coordinator at the Library of Congress, living in Maryland. Last year I crossed paths with a group, Hands Along the Nile, that does cross-cultural projects in Egypt. At my suggestion they have arranged a total solar eclipse trip around August 2, 2027 that will hit pyramids, temples, museums... and totality. At least two KU alum families are going; **email me for more info or to join:** raylmurray@yahoo.com

James Gort (BS `68):

"I have been a lecturer at the Adler Planetarium, researcher at McDonald Observatory, and adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa. I've been grinding and observing with precision optics for over 60 years, including at my 3-story self-built observatory.

"I had my KU astronomy courses taught by Dr. Storer. He was a great teacher on "practical astronomy." We had lots of hands-on training with the transit instrument but no training on the larger scopes (though I'd use the 6-inch Clark occasionally to view "pretty objects"). That said, we received no courses in astrophysics. Dr. Horak taught stellar atmospheres in Lindley Hall, and our class longed for that exposure. His teaching was restricted to the few grad students, however.

"One of my fondest memories was of special topics course in Radiative Transfer. Dr. Peter Richards brilliantly guided me through my myriad questions as I slogged through the textbook. I couldn't believe how easily Dr. Richards could explain the difficult concepts and equation derivations."

Teresa Symons (MS `17):

"After majoring in space physics at Embry-Riddle, I completed my master's degree at KU in computational physics and astronomy, focusing on computational techniques for automated aperture photometry. I then got my PhD at Rochester, followed by a postdoc at UC Irvine. I'm currently a staff scientist at IPAC in Pasadena, CA working on the upcoming NEO Surveyor mission. I also enjoy working with students of all ages, enabling them to see science as a potential future career and themselves as potential future scientists." <https://www.ipac.caltech.edu/meet-the-staff/teresa-symons>