Claudia J. Alexander Prize Will Honor Achievements By Mid-Career Planetary Scientists

The Division for Planetary Sciences (DPS) of the American Astronomical Society (AAS) is proud to introduce the Claudia J. Alexander Prize to recognize mid-career scientists who have made and continue to make outstanding research contributions advancing our knowledge of planetary systems, including our own solar system. The prize bridges the gap between the Harold C. Urey Prize for early career planetary scientists and the Gerard P. Kuiper Prize for more senior researchers. As this is a mid-career award it is expected that candidates have made outstanding contributions beyond the period of eligibility for the Urey prize (8 years beyond earning their final degree). More detailed criteria for consideration and selection are provided on the DPS Prizes page (https://dps.aas.org/prizes [1]).

Claudia Alexander was an outstanding planetary scientist as well as a passionate writer who worked tirelessly to promote representation of women and minorities in the field. Her significant contributions to planetary science would have made her an exemplary candidate for a DPS mid-career award. She worked briefly at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and the NASA Ames Research Center before moving to NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in 1986, where she spent most of her career. She received her PhD in atmospheric, oceanic, and space sciences from the University of Michigan in 1993. Some of Claudia’s key contributions at JPL include her role as Project Manager of the Galileo mission to the Jupiter system, U.S. Project Manager of the Rosetta mission to Comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko, and Science Coordinator on the Cassini mission to Saturn.

In addition to research, she also enjoyed writing and is the author of several children’s books, including Windows to Adventure: Which of the Mountains Is Greatest of All? (2015) and Windows to Adventure: Venus, the Morning Star (2014). She also wrote science fiction stories such as “Leo’s Mechanical Queen,” which appeared in the book The Omnibus of Doctor Bill Shakes and the Magnificent Ionic Pentatetrameter (2012).

Claudia served as chair of the American Geophysical Union’s diversity subcommittee and was a member of the Association for Women Geoscientists, which named her Woman of the Year in 1993. In 2003 she received the Emerald Honor for Women of Color in Research & Engineering from the Career Communications Group, publisher of Black Engineer & Information Technology magazine.

Claudia passed away in 2015 at the age of 56, in the prime of her career, after suffering from breast cancer.

“Claudia was a very special member of the planetary community,” says DPS Chair Amanda Hendrix (Planetary Science Institute). “She was a gifted scientist and science communicator with a smile that lit up the room. We miss her greatly! We are so pleased to name this new DPS mid-career prize in her honor. We look forward to receiving nominations for the first Claudia J. Alexander Prize next year.”

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The AAS Division for Planetary Sciences (DPS), organized in 1968, is the largest of the American Astronomical Society's six special-interest divisions. DPS members and affiliates study the bodies of our own solar system — from planets and moons to comets and asteroids — and all other solar system objects and processes. With the discovery that planets exist around other stars, the DPS now includes the study of extrasolar planetary systems as well.

The American Astronomical Society (AAS), established in 1899, is the major organization of professional astronomers in North America. Its membership of approximately 8,000 also includes physicists, mathematicians, geologists, engineers, and others whose research interests lie within the broad spectrum of subjects now comprising the astronomical sciences. The mission of the AAS is to enhance and share humanity's scientific understanding of the universe, which it achieves through publishing, meeting organization, policy advocacy, education and outreach, and training and professional development.