

ALUM PROFILE

“Seeing” Stars

Astronomer Noreen Grice promises the moon, the sun, and the stars to the visually impaired



PHOTO BY VERNON DOUCETTE

Noreen Grice (CAS’85) is the founder and president of You Can Do Astronomy LLC, a design and consulting business that makes space science accessible to the disabled.

AS AN ASTRONOMY major in 1984, Noreen Grice was working at the Boston Museum of Science’s Charles Hayden Planetarium when a group of blind visitors arrived for a show about the stars. She took their tickets, helped them to their seats, and started the prerecorded program.

“It wasn’t very descriptive,” says Grice (CAS’85), now an astronomer and the planetarium’s operations coordinator. “During the show, I was looking at the group and wondering what they thought. So at the end of the program, I asked them how they liked the show. They said they thought it stunk and walked away.”

Grice wasn’t put off by their honesty. Instead, she took a bus to Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, studied the astronomy books in its library — they were in Braille but had no pictures — and came up with an idea: create an illustrated astronomy book for the blind.

More than twenty years later, Grice is the author of five such books, with two more in the works, and is an expert in making astronomy and space science accessible to the disabled. Her books feature both text and color illustrations in print and in Braille. *Touch the Sun*, for example, renders the sun as a yellow and orange circle filled with raised ripples that represent the gas currents on its surface.

The books are meant to be read by the sighted and the visually impaired alike. “What I’m trying to do is to create materials that are useful for both populations, so there isn’t so much of ‘theirs,’ but more of ‘ours,’” Grice says.

Her initial efforts at making touchable images, back in 1984 with advisor Ken Janes, a College of Arts and Sciences professor of astronomy, were admittedly crude. “We’d try shellacking Play-Doh, all kinds of things,” Grice says. After putting the project aside — she earned a master’s at San Diego State University and later returned to the Museum of Science — Grice found a more high-tech solution. Using a Braille embosser, she began creating tactile images to accompany the planetarium shows; once the shows were accessible, she decided to revisit the book.

It took about a year to complete *Touch the Stars*. National Braille Press translated the words, and Grice created images of the Big Dipper, the Ring Nebula, Orion the Hunter, and other astronomical objects on a computer, which she then printed on heavy paper using the embosser. The museum published the first edition in 1990; all 400 sold out within a year. *Touch the Stars*, published by National Braille Press, is now in its fourth edition.

More books followed: *Touch the Universe: A NASA Braille Book of Astronomy* (2002), which includes embossed color images that were taken by the Hubble Telescope, *Touch the Sun* (2005), *The Little Moon Phase Book* (2005), and *Touch the Invisible Sky* (2007). “I’m just working my way through the universe,” Grice says.

“I get lots of e-mails from kids who are blind and want to become astronomers,” she says. “I’m trying to encourage them to think of possibilities. A lot of kids have said they’re going to be the first blind astronaut to walk on Mars. And I believe it’s going to happen.” CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI

ark, N.J. You can contact Michael at mdritz@aol.com.

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CHRISTINE BARATTA (COM’84) of Malden, Mass., is senior vice president of marketing and communications at the Massachusetts Hospital Association. Christine has more than 10 years of experience in hospital-based communications, having served in similar positions at Caritas Christi Health Care and Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

JANE BERRYMAN (COM’84) of Philadelphia, Pa., is a vice president of Raymond James & Associates. In 2006, she was admitted to the

Travelers’ Century Club, an international group for people who have been to 100 or more countries. “I’m in hot pursuit of a silver membership (150-plus countries), and I’ve just been appointed club director for the Southeast Pennsylvania/South Jersey region,” Jane writes. “Meanwhile, I also teach financial planning at Temple University while working on a professional designation called the CIMA at Wharton. Doing all that on top of my consulting work, when I’m stateside, I’m busy!” Friends can e-mail Jane at jane.berryman@raymondjames.com.

GEORGE GUERRA (ENG’84) of San Diego, Calif., was recently promoted to vice president of Northrop Grumman’s Global Hawk un-

manned aerial system program. “Work is going well, and living in San Diego is the best,” he writes. “Hope to come back soon and root the Terriers on to another Beanpot title!” Contact George at ggurrall@san.rr.com.

ROBERT MCKINSTRY (ENG’84) of Chesterfield, Mo., writes, “I’m happily living in a St. Louis suburb with my spouse, Hilarie, and our daughters, Meagan, 14, and Katie, 13.” Robert is radiologist-in-chief at St. Louis Children’s Hospital and an associate professor at the Washington University School of Medicine. His research interest is imaging the developing brain and its response to injury. Robert can be reached at bobmckinstry@yahoo.com.