

Remembering Bobbie Vaile

Dr Roberta Anne 'Bobbie' Vaile (25 June 1959 – 13 November 1996)



Foreword by Tony Law

At our Macarthur Astronomy Forum on November 21 2016 we remembered the 20th anniversary of the passing of Dr Bobbie Vaile, several of our members remember her at UWS and a couple took her astrophysics class. Below are two letters from those who knew her best, co-workers Dr Carol Oliver (UNSW) and Dr Trevor Bailey (WSU), and their memories of her:

Dr. Bobbie Vaile: A short life dedicated to SETI research and education

by Carol Oliver, Australian Centre for Astrobiology, University of New South Wales

The 13th November 2016 marked the 20th anniversary of the death of a remarkable young Australian astrophysicist, teacher and science communicator – Dr. Roberta Anne “Bobbie” Vaile. Bobbie touched the lives of many SETI researchers around the world and successfully pioneered the first university level SETI course in Australia in 1994.

Bobbie was born in Junee, New South Wales. She attended the University of Newcastle, where she received her B.Sc. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of New South Wales with a thesis entitled "The Corona Australis Complex" in 1989.

She then joined the staff here at WSU (UWS that was) and became the senior lecturer in physics. She was involved with Project Phoenix (a SETI experiment) and influential in the establishment of the SETI Australia Centre, created at the university in 1995. She died following a seven-year battle with an inoperable brain tumour.

Bobbie was awarded the Australian Science Communicators' "Unsung Hero of Australian Science" award in 1995 for her work in developing easy and friendly methods of teaching science.

Bobbie was an active SETI researcher. While her own life was running out she searched for life elsewhere in the universe as a volunteer observer on Project Phoenix during its six-month stint at the Parkes radio telescope in New South Wales. During that time she used the media effectively to talk passionately about the dichotomy of her brain cancer and being a SETI researcher as well as her commitment to her faith. In this way she reached out and touched hundreds of thousands of ordinary Australians, and brought hardened news journalists to tears on national television with her confidence, laughter, and dedication to her SETI work in the face of certain death.

One of Bobbie’s key SETI contributions may be a paper on which she was co-author and which has implications for a new ten-year SETI project at Parkes, the Breakthrough Listen (BL) project. In 1996 The Astronomical Journal (Vol 112,#1 July 1996), Bobbie, Ron Ekers (Australia Telescope National Facility) and Seth Shostak (SETI Institute) published “A Search for Artificial Signals from the Small Magellanic Cloud”, the first results from Project Phoenix at the Parkes Telescope. Essentially the research leveraged the best use of Parkes receivers to take a middle road between looking at individual stars and whole sky surveys by searching three small patches of the Magellanic Clouds – a strategy that may prove to be a BL strategy too.

The 20th anniversary of Bobbie’s passing, at the age of 37, provides the impetus to explore in this paper her SETI research and education legacy, which left an impact still felt today. It sets her work on record in a way not possible in the pre-internet days of the mid 1990s when her story took place.

A memorial garden at the University of Western Sydney was dedicated to Bobbie in 1999, and there is a park/reserve in Camden, New South Wales (at 34°03'33"S 150°42'42"E), named after her. A minor planet, "6708 Bobbievaile", was also named after her.

Dr Bobbie Vaile – Scientist, Educator and Communicator

by Dr Trevor Bailey

Dr Bobbie Vaile was an outstanding scientist and educator. Her achievements as an astrophysicist and as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Western Sydney are well known.

However, to understand Bobbie the scientist, it is important to grasp the values of Bobbie the person. Bobbie was a very special person who looked to the sky but also loved her friends, home and garden. She was energetic, enthusiastic, inquisitive, passionate about her science, ready to help and support others, and always keen for a new challenge.

Bobbie moved to Camden after she began her work at the Campbelltown Campus of UWS. Like all that she did, Bobbie embraced her new home town, and all it had to offer, with her customary enthusiasm and total commitment.

Bobbie came from country NSW, and she also enjoyed the sophistication of the city. For her, Camden provided a great opportunity to mix the best that the city and the country can provide. She loved the Camden Show, and she was always up for coffee and cake with friends at the various cafes in Argyll Street.

Bobbie loved her home and neighbours in Elderslie, and was completely committed to the region. Bobbie was determined to play her part in bringing high-quality tertiary science education opportunities to the people of the Macarthur region. She relished the opportunities that the new University provided, both for her and for the community.

Bobbie had friends in all spheres of life. This reflected the person she was. When meeting new people she wanted to know all about them and their world to extend hers. I remember taking her camping by the Wollondilly River. Camping was a new experience for Bobbie, but she had a fabulous weekend and sucked the most she could out of the experience. No wonder she also looked outward professionally as this curiosity motivated her.

Bobbie loved her piano. The lounge-room of her home in Elderslie was dominated by a baby grand piano. Bobbie had a reputation for making rich chocolate cakes – cakes that simple words cannot describe. The cakes were a catalyst. Good food, diverse and interesting people and Bobbie's enthusiasm brought people together.

Bobbie's PhD was in astrophysics, a love that she maintained throughout the remainder of her life, leading to her participation in SETI. Bobbie was devoted to SETI in her last years as she strove to extend our horizons. In her professional life, as in her personal life, Bobbie was always inquisitive and ready for new experiences. Being an inquisitive scientist, Bobbie also embraced the study of the properties of materials for superconducting magnets.

Bobbie was passionate about science, and equally passionate about showing others the beauty, excitement and importance of science. At a time when the importance of science communication was poorly understood by scientists, Bobbie recognised the fundamental importance of communicating the successes of science to a wide audience. It was her aim to show everybody her commitment to science, but also the excitement and wonder of science. She was not afraid to communicate her passion to students, colleagues and the community. Bobbie's commitment to science communication was recognised by the award of the "Unsung Hero of Australian Science" in 1995.

Bobbie's efforts to support and encourage others were simply extraordinary. Students, colleagues, friends, all were embraced and supported with enthusiasm, thoughtfulness and respect. Bobbie was a mentor to many students, and welcomed them into her life, recognising and enjoying what each had to offer. Even when unwell herself, she talked about and explained her declining health to students and educated about brain tumours and treatment.

Bobbie was a colleague, but most of all to me, she was a great friend. In 1996, Australian science lost a unique scientist and communicator, and we lost a friend.

Links

[Bobbie Vaile - Wikipedia page](#)

[Asteroid Bobbie Vaile - Wikipedia page](#) - a binary asteroid!

[Bobbie Vaile - SETI Australia page](#)

[Western Sydney University](#)