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Astronomer receives national award for work in education

By STEWART MCCLINTIC Published February 10, 2012 at 3:53am Updated February 10, 2012 at 3:53am

UA astronomer Don McCarthy has spent nearly all his career at the UA, and is now being rewarded for it.

McCarthy has been at the UA since the 1970s, when he was a graduate student pursuing his doctorate in astronomy. Afterward, he became a post-doctorate fellow at the university, then an assistant astronomer and eventually a full-time astronomer. After 42 years of service at the UA, the American Astronomical Society is awarding McCarthy the annual Education Prize. McCarthy will also receive a \$1,500 stipend for education from the society for the work he has done over the years in educating people in the field of astronomy.

In addition to working in the Steward Observatory, McCarthy helps run the astronomy camp each summer, which is now in its 25th year, as well as working with the Girl Scouts of the USA in education outreach projects. Although McCarthy has taught classes previously, he is not technically a professor. Instead, he said his main focus at the UA's observatory is research in astronomy.

McCarthy said he likes teaching basic skills to students who don't know them. He said most students don't know basic math skills, such as fifth to seventh grade arithmetic, and that students nowadays do not see the value of learning such basic concepts.

"Like a good vocabulary, one word can say everything, and so can one number," McCarthy said. These basic skills place students "a cut above the job search," he added.

Marcia Rieke, a professor of astronomy since the mid-'70s at the UA, has known McCarthy ever since she has been here, and said McCarthy has had a reputation of being an "Iron Man" because of his hard work and dedication. She added that this also comes from his former passion for doing long-distance running and marathons.

Rieke said she works with McCarthy on his education and public outreach with the Girl Scouts.

"There's not much else to say except he's a good guy," Rieke said.

Larry Lebofsky, a Steward Observatory technical expert who has worked with McCarthy for 35 years, said McCarthy puts all he has into everything he does, and that "he is really dedicated to what he does."