

2023 AAS SETF Interview Transcript

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When I'm experiencing a solar eclipse, it feels like time is compressed. And I start thinking about all the things that I want to be looking for and experiencing. But I am mostly just visually stunned because no matter how many you see, every time you see another total solar eclipse, it feels kind of like the first one.

It stops you. It just stops you and grabs you and makes you stare into the sky.

I feel exhilarated and anxious and nervous and happy and awestruck and overwhelmed. So that's kind of how I feel. Mostly rushed.

I'm an astronomer. Sometimes people say, are you an amateur or a professional astronomer? And I say, yes, because I'm both. I was trained as a professional astronomer, and I have my Ph.D. in astronomy. But I got into astronomy as a kid. And so I started out as just a backyard stargazer. And I continued to do backyard stargazing because I really enjoy it.

I got out of astronomy research and into education and outreach, because I discovered while I was in graduate school that I enjoyed teaching about talking about and writing about astronomy even more than I liked doing it.

The AAS Solar Eclipse Task Force is very interdisciplinary. It's a group of people who all have an interest in solar eclipses but come at it from different perspectives. So obviously, amateur and professional astronomers are involved, since we're trying to reach out to the public. We have media people involved. Since we're concerned about communities being prepared for a likely influx of tens of thousands of visitors, we have state and local government and emergency management and traffic departments, people like that involved.

We have educators, because a lot of how you reach people about solar eclipses is in schools or museums or planetariums.

So it's this very eclectic group all brought together because of their common interest in people having a safe and enjoyable experience around the total solar eclipse that's coming.

My involvement in the solar Eclipse Task force predates the 2017 eclipse. In 2014, when we formed the task force, I was working as the [AAS] press officer, but as the most experienced eclipse chaser on the staff and as someone whose whole reason for being professionally is to share the wonders of astronomy with other people, I insisted that I be part of it.

Nothing gives me more satisfaction in public outreach in astronomy than seeing the looks on other people's faces and hearing their exclamations when they experience a view through a telescope, a bright meteor or a solar eclipse. And so I wanted to continue to be involved in an effort to bring that kind of experience to as many people as possible.

Everyone on the Solar Eclipse Task Force is committed to the effort, and by the end of the effort, we'll need to be committed. [smiles]

I feel like I am among friends and fellow enthusiasts who share many of the same motivations that I do, which is... you know, we want people to have a safe and enjoyable experience. We want the country to feel like it successfully wrangled this massive event, which is like having a Super Bowl in 20 or 30 cities all at the same time on the same day.

Everybody knows what they bring to it. And how to take their piece of what they bring to it and fit it into all the other pieces.

The most common type of eclipse outreach I do is when I'm leading an eclipse tour. So there I'm usually with a tour group, mostly amateur astronomers. I also do outreach to my local library and to my local public, and I've also done some with local school students.

One of the things I like to encourage people to keep in mind if a total solar eclipse is coming: Whatever they might have heard, it is perfectly safe to look at totality without eye protection. So I encourage people to get eye protection, eclipse glasses, a handheld solar viewer, or some kind of pinhole projector. But I remind them that once the eclipse is total and the moon is completely blocking the sun's bright face, they need to take that protection off and look with their own eyes because the spectacle is just so unimaginatively beautiful and they really need to take a look.

I tell people that that everybody should try to experience a total solar eclipse at least once in their lifetime

A total solar eclipse is compared to anything *other* than a total solar eclipse, as, you know, making love, versus getting a kiss from your grandma.

But the real the real thing is that in our world today, not everybody gets a chance to experience true awe. And if nothing else, a total solar eclipse is genuinely awesome, not in the colloquial sense of the word, but truly an all-encompassing experience that hits you emotionally and hits you mentally and hits you physically.

And it's so...it moves people in a way that falling in love moves people. And why would you not want to have that experience at least once in your life?