

Theater club at NASA center gives scientists creative outlet

June 7 2018, by Courtney Columbus

Susan Breon wears two hats: scientist and musician.

By day, she's a cryogenics engineer at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, where she works on what she calls a "baby step toward a mission to Mars." By night, she participates in Goddard's Music and Drama Club, often known as MAD. She played keyboard for the club's spring musical.

"The work here can get very intense," said Breon, a 30-year NASA veteran. "We did our thermal vacuum testing a couple of months ago, and it was an around-the-clock, 24/7 operation."

The club members include scientists, engineers and managers who work for NASA on projects including weather satellites and space telescopes, and they say the club is a creative outlet for them.

"We've got more engineers per square foot than any other theater group around," said Randy Barth, who directed the club's latest musical, "Weird Romance."

MAD has staged at least one show a year at Goddard since 1970, from "Oklahoma!" and "The Sound of Music" to science-fiction fare. Club members say it helps them with their day jobs and shows the public another side of scientists at the sprawling flight center northeast of Washington.

Astrophysicist Kim Weaver is the club's president. Doing theater helps her connect with people who aren't scientists, she says.

"When I say I'm an astrophysicist, I usually get a blank stare. So in order to get (people) to actually open up and smile at me, I then say I also do theater, because that's the part that they think is cool," Weaver said.

"You say you're a scientist, and I think that scares people. They think they can't talk to you."

She was a graduate student intern when she saw a flyer about the club's auditions for "Sweet Charity." Making the show was what led her to take a job at Goddard.

"It really helped improve my chances, even in my career," Weaver said.

"I met some more senior astronomers who later on down the line were able to help steer me and guide me in my career path."

"Weird Romance" combines science and drama.

In the first act, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In," a corporate mogul creates his own celebrity using a beautiful, artificial body that is controlled by a homeless woman.

The second, "Her Pilgrim Soul," was adapted from a "Twilight Zone" episode. In it, a projector shows holographic images of a woman that were not programmed into it, to the surprise of the scientists involved.

One of the production's stage directions describes a character as having "a smile that could melt frozen methane."

Breon considered that a good omen, since her job actually involves melting frozen methane.

"We have to do more than smile at it, though," she joked.

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