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DR BOBBIE VAILE: A SHORT LIFE DEDICATED TO SETI RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

Abstract

2016 marks the 20th anniversary of the death of a remarkable young Australian astrophysicist, teacher and science communicator – Dr. Roberta “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 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 co-authored with Ron Ekers (Australia Telescope National Facility) and Seth Shostak (SETI Institute) four months into the Project Phoenix stint at Parkes. This research leveraged the best use of Parkes receivers to take a middle road between looking at individual stars and whole sky surveys by searching for signals from dense concentrations of stars in the Magellanic Clouds. This is perhaps a strategy that may prove fruitful for the new Breakthrough Listen (BL) project at Parkes.

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 to late 1990s when her story took place.