

Ladd Observatory Staff Astronomer Francine Jackson Recently Featured on Close Up Radio

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EINPresswire.com/ -- Francine picked her career off a library shelf. At the age of 8, she began pulling astronomy books off the shelves and never really put them back. Five decades later, she is still handing a telescope over to strangers and watching the reaction on their faces.

Francine's path to the stars ran through an English class in college. While studying physics at the Community College of Rhode Island, she wrote a term paper on the invented language Newspeak from George Orwell's "1984" for Professor Walter Brownsword, chairman of the college's English department. She received an A for that



paper; and the conversation that followed set her course. Brownsword asked what she planned to do the following year, and when she said she had no idea, he wrote down a list of six schools with astronomy degree programs. She was accepted at the University of Illinois.

In 1972, Francine walked into Ladd Observatory in Providence for the first time and stopped in her tracks. The building, opened in 1891, was nearly identical in structure to the observatory where she had studied in Illinois, five years its junior. "It was like going home," she shares.

Ladd Observatory has changed little since the 19th century. Its dome still turns open by hand on a pulley system, and nothing on the main telescope runs on electricity. Visitors climb the same steps that astronomy students climbed more than a hundred years ago. Francine says the manual process teaches something a computer guided telescope cannot: patience and a working knowledge of the sky itself. "You have to know the sky to use a manual telescope," she explains. "The computerized telescopes, you place your finger, push a button, and you're there."

They are taking all of the adventure out of astronomy."

For 50 years, Francine has been part of Ladd Observatory's weekly open houses, greeting visitors with little more than coffee and cookies and an open invitation to look through the eyepiece. When the city of Providence closed the observatory to install an elevator, she waited out the long restoration and returned to her post as soon as the doors reopened.

Part of the draw, she shares, is the building itself. Ladd has been kept close to its original condition on purpose, so visitors feel like they are stepping into an earlier century the moment they walk in. She also points newcomers toward the observatory's nine foot grandfather clock, built by a wealthy amateur clockmaker from Pawtucket who had its case fitted with glass panels so onlookers can watch the mechanism run. The clock keeps both solar time and sidereal time on two separate pendulums, four minutes apart. "People are going back in time when they see this," she says.

Last February, the International IAU WG Small Bodies Nomenclature (WGSBN) named an asteroid in Francine's honor, a distinction she says left her stunned. She is one of only about four or five people in Rhode Island who hold it. "I feel very honored," she shares.

Francine has also become a vocal advocate for Dark skies. Light pollution has erased much of the Milky Way from the view at Ladd Observatory, she explains, forcing her to point out constellations that used to be obvious to the naked eye. A proposed project called Reflect Orbital, which would launch a satellite mirror designed to cast reflected sunlight across a three mile patch of Earth at night, worries her deeply. She supports the International Dark Sky Organization's push to slow such projects, warning that artificial light at that scale will disrupt nighttime plant, animal and human life across the region.

Ask Francine for her favorite memory at the eyepiece and she does not hesitate: Saturn. "This little dot in the sky, and suddenly you look in and it's a big blob with rings," she explains. "Seeing Saturn for the first time really takes people's breath away." She says the night sky offers something rare to people who carry heavy schedules and long to do lists: a reason to stop, if only for a couple of minutes, and remember how much lies beyond our own front doors.

When she isn't at the observatory, Francine still loves to read. She writes astronomy book reviews for a local planetarium and for her amateur astronomy society, which she says is always glad to have a volunteer willing to read the newest title and report back.

About the Ladd Observatory

The Ladd Observatory has operated in Providence, Rhode Island, since 1891, offering free weekly open houses to the public. Its original telescope and hand operated dome remain in daily use, giving visitors a chance to view the night sky through equipment largely unchanged since the Victorian era.

Close Up Radio recently featured Francine Jackson, Ladd Observatory staff astronomer, in an interview with Doug Llewelyn on Monday September 28th at 10am Eastern

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<https://open.spotify.com/episode/2Uaz45mnT321UJYcrcwmeV>

For more information about Francine Jackson, Ladd Observatory staff astronomer, please visit the following pages

<https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/ambassadors/1485/>

<https://www.ccri.edu/news/2025/francine-jackson-asteroid.html>

https://www.valleybreeze.com/news/jackson-honored-for-50-years-of-service-to-ladd-observatory/article_74756714-6f8c-11ed-bb27-7b75c7df81bd.html/

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