

Astronomy Day returns with a blast and an out-of-this-world AIAA Distinguished Speaker

By Robin Osborne, AIAA GHS Pre-college Outreach Director

After a two-year hiatus due to COVID, Astronomy Day was back and better than ever on Oct. 22, 2022. The annual event, hosted by the Von Braun Astronomical Society (VBAS), offered a day of free activities to the public, including solar viewing, mini-planetarium shows, and numerous STEAM demonstrations by organizations such as NASA, AIAA, HAL5, Alabama STEAMfest, the U.S. Space & Rocket Center, NSC Huntsville, and Marshall Amateur Radio Club. Judging from the large, festive crowd in attendance, space enthusiasts were ecstatic for the return of this unique event.

AIAA Greater Huntsville Section (GHS) members Michaela Hemming, Saroj Kumar, Manuel Diaz, Tate Osborne, Leo Osborne, and Robin Osborne helped children launch 3D-printed film canister rockets fueled with sodium bicarbonate and water, while Dr. Naveen Vetcha, former VBAS president and past AIAA GHS chair, served as the speaker for a planetarium show on the James Webb Space Telescope.



AIAA members Michaela Hemming and Saroj Kumar help kids fuel up miniature rockets.

In the evening, AIAA GHS further supported the event by bringing AIAA Distinguished Speaker Alice Bowman to the planetarium to discuss the voyage of NASA’s historic journey to Pluto and the Kuiper Belt, as told from her perspective as Mission Operations

Manager (MOM) for the New Horizons spacecraft. The arrangements for this special keynote speaker were coordinated by Dr. Vetcha.



AIAA Distinguished speaker and NASA New Horizons Mission Operations Manager Alice Bowman and Dr. Naveen Vetcha at the Wernher von Braun Planetarium.

Ms. Bowman spoke about the technical, scientific, and personal challenges of leading the space probe across the solar system on its voyage to the farthest reaches of the planetary frontier. She graciously answered a variety of questions from both children and adults who were intrigued with her story about the historic flyby of Pluto in July 2015 and the Kuiper Belt on New Year’s 2019, 4 billion miles from Earth.



AIAA member Manuel Diaz (left) speaks to Astronomy Day attendees.



NASA Mission Operations Manager Alice Bowman (left) discusses her involvement with the New Horizons spacecraft and how it increased human understanding of the dwarf planet Pluto.