



Dr Bobbie Vaile

(1959–1996)

For Dr Bobbie Vaile there wasn't a minute to lose, even though, as she admitted to one television reporter while sitting by her favourite radio telescope at Parkes, some days were not so good.

There was a whole Universe out there, with many puzzles and the most intriguing question of all—are we alone in this vast ocean of space? The fact that the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) was unlikely to bear fruit in the short lifespan she had left didn't perturb her. 'Wouldn't it be boring if we knew all the answers?' she said.

In her mid-thirties, a talented university lecturer, an astrophysicist and a committed Christian, Bobbie was dying from a brain tumour. Doctors had given her only months to live when the team from the SETI Institute in California arrived at the Parkes radio telescope for a six-month stint in the first half of 1995, with a team of astrophysicists and computer experts led by another remarkable woman, astronomer Dr Jill Tarter.

Phoenix is a direct descendant of the SETI project NASA was forced to abandon in 1993, and the Australian visit was its first field trip. It made the first months difficult ones, with errors being all too easy to do and various comments in the log book

tell the story of that. Bobbie inserted her own brand of humour into the account. One entry reads 'BV killed system'. 'We are so glad we have those log books', remarked Jill.

Despite her illness, Bobbie not only took on long observing shifts, but in any spare time, worked on a users' manual for Project Phoenix. She knew the telescope well but the Phoenix equipment was new to her so while she learned she set about making the process easier for other newcomers.

Bobbie called the manual the 'Idiot's Guide to Project Phoenix', again reflecting her sense of humour. Though it has since been updated as the equipment has become more advanced, it is still in use today at the 140 foot radio telescope in Green Bank, West Virginia, where Phoenix is currently carrying out its northern hemisphere observing program.

Anyone meeting Bobbie for the first time was most likely going to be surprised by this pint-sized Australian. Leave an empty cup around, or look weary for an instant, Bobbie would be by your side asking if you'd like another coffee or tea, offering a picking from the jelly bean jar or asking if she could use her skills in some way to help.

'The funny thing is that it's Bobbie everyone should be worrying about', one of the American members of the team quipped for yet another television crew visiting Parkes to report on the search at that time.

This reputation as the tea-lady was only one small facet of a warm and caring individual with an enduring passion for the joy of life and the ability to give that gift to others.

Another member of the Phoenix team, Jane Jordan recalls, 'One afternoon in the telescope control room during Bobbie's shift, we were working feverishly to test some software upgrades to the observing system. We were completely absorbed in debugging, when Bobbie called us out onto the balcony to witness an absolutely glorious Parkes sunset. She brought our focus back to the real world with one of nature's breathtaking moments. She had a way of putting things into proper perspective.'

It was through SETI that Bobbie became a media personality, talking animatedly about both the project and her battle with cancer. Her extraordinary faith in life, in God and in the Universe came through strongly over dozens of television, radio and print media interviews.

Channel 9's Today Show was particularly taken by Bobbie's infectious and joyful charm. In the course of a year she appeared on it three times and it always resulted in a shoal of calls to the show and sackfuls of mail. Some of it was simply addressed 'Bobbie Vaile, Parkes' and it would arrive at her office at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, where she was a senior physics lecturer in the Faculty of Business Technology.

Bobbie's teaching skills were legendary. One student, Melanie Bettle, now a physics high school teacher said: 'She made physics so exciting—she didn't care how much of a mess she made of the lab, as long as she got her point across. I'm teaching physics today because of Bobbie.'

As one of her fellow lecturers, Dr Frank Stootman, recalled: 'She encouraged people to believe in themselves.' That caring and sense of humour were always evident. Her office door was festooned with cartoons for the benefit of staff and students. She believed that when people laughed they were more relaxed.

Dean of the Faculty, Associate Professor Roger Alexander said, 'Bobbie's work at the University—in research and in teaching—was always on the edge, always pushing forward and never content to just fill in the gaps.'

A career in astrophysics was chosen at an early age—at nine years old she was handed a pair of glasses to correct a hitherto unknown problem. For the first time she saw the beauty of a star-filled night sky and the moon as more than a fuzzy blob. 'I thought that's the way everyone saw it', she said.

Educated in Wagga Wagga and Newcastle, she completed her Bachelor of Science Honours degree at Newcastle and her doctorate at the University of NSW, with part of her studies being done at the Parkes radio telescope.

Her research and consulting interests included 21-cm HI structures within the galaxy, star formation indicators in the radio regime; galactic methanol masers; interacting 'starburst' galaxies; high temperature superconductors (microwave processing for commercial manufacturing); stimulation of collaborative research, tertiary and industry sectors to optimise international contributions and of course, SETI—in particular the consequences for society. She also worked on the multibeam project installed at Parkes in January to increase by tenfold the telescope's speed and power for searching.

Bobbie's love of teaching science reached out in another way. She was also one of the prime movers in forming the SETI Australia Centre at the Campbelltown campus of UWS Macarthur. Last year, as one of its projects, 12 Sydney high schools took part in a science education trial using materials developed by the SETI Institute in California. It proved so successful that another, much larger, project is planned for this year.

Her success in communicating science in the media was recognised in 1995 when Bobbie won the Australian Science Communicators' Unsung Hero Award. The prize, a specially commissioned painting, now hangs in the Chief Executive Officer's unit at UWS Macarthur.

Early in 1996, when she discovered that the tumour had grown dramatically and she faced another operation and more chemotherapy she chose to go on the Today Show one more time to talk about the cancer. She drove the interview in exactly the direction she wanted to achieve, calling on all the skills she had learned in her contact with the media.

There was also a story behind her trip to the studios, which happened just days before her final operation, and one that perfectly reveals the effect she had on all she met no matter what she was facing personally in her life.

When the car arrived for her from Channel 9, it turned out to be a limousine with a uniformed chauffeur. She had become special enough to the people at the Today Show to do that. Unfazed, she climbed in and promptly asked for an early morning coffee. 'Where would you like to go Ma'am?' asked the driver.

For Bobbie there was only one choice. Her favourite McDonald's at Narellan near her home. The driver negotiated the take out booth and as the electric window silently slid down, Bobbie smiled at the staff she knew so well and said brightly, 'I'm in a different car today!'

She sipped her coffee, talking with the driver all the way to the studios. After the show, he took her for a cappuccino in Sydney's Darling Harbour complex before taking her home on a gloriously clear blue Australian summer day.

When Bobbie was in the final months of her life and ill in hospital, she had an urge for a McDonald's breakfast—but it was the afternoon when breakfasts are not served. When staff at Narellan discovered though it was for Bobbie, it was made and wrapped specially for her.

Later Bobbie managed to return home to see her blossoming garden that Spring. She died at home, surrounded by her family, on 13 November, 1996.

The plaque for a memorial garden being created at UWS Macarthur reads: 'This courtyard is named in the memory of Dr Bobbie Vaile, BSc(Hons), PhD, MASA, 1959–1996, senior lecturer, gifted astrophysicist, teacher, communicator and friend to many at UWS Macarthur. Her faith in life, in God and in the Universe was without limit.'

Bobbie, who lived in Elderslie near Camden, NSW, never married. She is survived by her parents, two sisters and a brother.

Carol Oliver

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Western Sydney, Macarthur and media
coordinator for the SETI Australia Centre