

Q&A with astronomer James Young

SEEN FROM SEASIDE

R.J. MARX



Longtime Seasider James Young.

James Whitney Young was born in Portland 1941. He is an American astronomer who worked in the field of asteroid research. After nearly 47 years with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at their Table Mountain Facility, Young retired in 2009 as the resident astronomer of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Table Mountain Observatory near Wrightwood, California. Young was the lead technical guide at the NASA exhibit of the Seattle World's Fair during 1962. It was there he was encouraged to apply for an "assistant observer" and "darkroom technician" position at the recently developed Table Mountain Observatory.

With the advent of powerful lasers, Young became involved with several projects that aimed lasers successfully, first at the Surveyor VII spacecraft on the moon in 1968, later as two laser ranging programs developed at JPL in the 1990s found their marks on low and high earth orbiting satellites, as well as the Galileo spacecraft some 6 million kilometers from the earth.

In 2003 Young accepted a new responsibility as "astronomy team leader" where he maintained the optical performance of the telescopes and cameras, a position he held until his retirement.

His main focus was before retirement was the discovery, recovery and confirmation of newly discovered asteroids and comets. He is credited with more than 250 asteroid discoveries, including two near-earth asteroids.



Q: How long have you been coming to Seaside?

Young: My grandfather was an attorney in Portland and he liked to vacation on the beach. He built a house here on South Prom in 1943. I've been here almost every year. My wife Karen and I now have a house on Ninth Street. She's also interested in astronomy.

Q: How did you get interested in the field?

Young: Bob and Hazel Sealy lived on Ocean Vista Drive. My brother and I met them in 1958. He (Sealy) had a telescope. Although I was already into astronomy, he was a key ingredient in my establishing my astronomy career. We started the Seaside Amateur Astronomers group.

Q: Is the North Coast a good place for astronomy?

Young: No, it's a horrible place. It's the moisture and clouds. You need clear skies without moisture. Humidity is terrible. You will find that observatories around the world are located in high elevations, away from light pollution and at dry facilities. We did astronomy here when we had the chance because it was fun!

Q: Did you study science in college?

Young: I went to school, but I didn't finish.

My dad had gotten me a job at the bank, which I wasn't interested in, but it was a job. Then along came the Seattle World's Fair in 1962. I got a job offer as the lead guide at the Seattle World's Fair NASA Exhibit and

took the job offer at 21.

Q: That was huge!

Young: I quit the bank job and my dad was pretty mad with me. He said, "You know, in six months when the fair is over, you're through."

I became the lead guide for the astronomy exhibit because of my astronomy background. We had 32 guides and I taught them astronomy. Ten million people went through that exhibit in six months. We had NASA, astronauts, a cosmonaut from Russia came through. John Glenn was there. It was a big thing — it was so inspiring to be able to do that and continue to learn.

Q: How did you get the job with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena?

Young: One of the gentlemen who came through the exhibit was (senior engineer) Tom Bickler from JPL who said: "By the way, we're building an observatory. Why don't you apply for a job?"

Q: You were only in your 20s. What distinguished you from other candidates?

Young: They flew me down for an interview. The day of my interview I was picked up and taken to the observatory on a VIP tour: the laboratory director, his wife and quite a few of the mucky mucks — the high-falutin' people.

I was green behind the ears but I knew astronomy.

When it got dark that evening, they turned the telescope on, we started viewing, and it broke. Nobody knew what to do. I said, "Have you got a toolbox?"

In 30 minutes I had the telescope running again. I was hired without an interview.

Q: What was your job?

I was hired as a darkroom technician. To be a little technical we did synoptic patrols of Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn by taking spectroscopic plates — photographs — of these planets to investigate their cloud covers in different wavelengths of light.

We observed comets and asteroids. We had star parties. It was an outreach for the community. One thing led to another, and we eventually got a bigger telescope. I started doing real science with an astronomer at JPL and things started rolling.

Q: UFOs — is there any evidence?

Young: It came up with me once, when I was pretty young. I'm not saying yay or nay ... I have no evidence, but when you see something that you can't really account for in normal things, you call it an unidentified flying object.

However, my feeling is little green monsters that are sticky with one eye — I'm sorry, that doesn't fly with me.

Q: But there was something going on?

Young: I was just standing outside the observatory one night when I saw something go by too fast, too high, too odd-shaped to make any other sense. We never found out



James Young

Rare shooting of a bright fireball during the Leonid meteor shower, Nov. 17, 1966.

what it was.

Q: You are known for identifying asteroids. What's the difference between an asteroid and a planet?

Young: Asteroids are relatively small. Planets are pretty good size. An asteroid is relatively small. Most of them are found between Mars and Jupiter as they rotate the sun. They are little pieces of material that can be 20, 40 or 80 miles in diameter or smaller. They have permanent orbits. I've discovered a lot of them.

Q: Are they barren objects?

Young: That's right. Rock of some sort, maybe ice, Some metals. Mining asteroids might be a feasible thing to do.

Q: Harnessing them? Aren't they moving fast?

Young: So are we. We're going 66,000 mph around the sun. We've already had several spacecraft go to asteroids. They've gone to comets.

Q: Could an asteroid come into our atmosphere?

Young: It could, if it came close to earth. There are about 1,600 near-earth asteroids that have a potential to get pretty close to the earth.

Q: Are we at risk?

Young: It would take a fairly big asteroid to destroy the earth. We think the earth was hit by an asteroid 65 million years ago, which demised the dinosaurs.

That's a pretty reasonable theory. It is a theory, not a fact.

Back in 2010 an extremely small asteroid hit the earth and we found evidence of that. But something a mile in diameter hitting the earth would create serious problems.

Q: Are people concerned about that?

Young: Some are. I'm not.

Q: Why not?

Young: You're going to get hit by lightning 1,000 times before an asteroid is going to hit the earth. You don't need to worry about it. It's a waste of time.

When you drive out of this driveway, you're going to get hit by a car before you are hit by an asteroid.

Q: When did you get serious about landscape photography?

Young: I got my start is back in about 1980. I ran into some New York-based photographers down in Cannon Beach. I learned a lot from them in the span of the Christ-

mas holidays: how to shoot sunset photography, the waves. That gave me a boost. I was doing astronomy, then I realized I could really move into this.

Q: Your photos of the lighthouse, Terrible Tilly, off the coast are incredible. How long have you been shooting there?

Young: Close to 40 years. Every time I'm up here, when I hear the waves at night, I know the winds are coming, I know it's the back side. If the road is open I go to Ecola State Park.

Q: Can you get closer?

Young: Hikers can. You can drive to Indian Beach walk up the trail, which is a mile and a half. You're a quarter-mile closer and looking down. I'm 77 and it's getting a little hard to hike that, and if you're lugging a big lens, a 13-pound lens, tripod. The last time I was up there was two years ago.

Q: Are you a student of Terrible Tilly?

Young: A couple of years ago I took the Ironwood boat out of Tongue Point. We went around the lighthouse four times for the event with people from Oregon Public Broadcasting. I know the owner, Mimi Morrisette. I was allowed to be one of the photographers to help document the event. I've flown over in a helicopter, and later flown in a plane with the door off of it so I could do photography in 2015.

Q: Do you continue to use telescopes here?

Young: I do astronomy here when I can. We looked at a comet when we first got here early in December. Last summer I brought both my trackers so both my wife and I could do astronomy here. We did quite a bit of it this past summer. If we get a clear sky, we go down to south of Tolovana Park where there's a big turnout on the highway. It's not bad.

We set up our trackers there in the middle of the night — and we do good photography.

We normally do our best photography at Big Bend National Park in Texas, because it's further south, really dark, and higher elevation.

If we can add everything — no humidity, no lights, no elevation — then we get our best images.

Q: Do you have any secrets to share?

Young: Most of the best pictures aren't planned hours or days in advance. You have to be there at the right time — and guess what: "Click!"

A chance encounter on the Prom

Feeling somewhat stressed and worn out as an old mop, I booked myself a facial with Kristi Carson, a massage therapist and facialist working at Seaside Massage and Spa. Kristi and I met when I came to interview Alishia Ryan who owns the place. We had an immediate rapport; when she told me she loves doing facials, I made a mental note to follow up.

I signed up for the spa's Mermaid Signature Facial which includes a complete assessment of the skin, followed by a custom treatment directed to achieve optimum radiance. The facial included quite a bit of massage — arms, shoulders, décolleté — and it was very soothing and relaxing and wonderful for the complexion. Kristi primarily used products the spa sells, most particularly Essance Skincare, a Portland-made brand created by Jasmine Tran, made from natural ingredients and essential oils. Kristi also slathered my face with some rare kind of honey, yes, honey, the kind you eat, and I think that was my favorite part, aside, of course, from her light but decisive touch. At one point she asked if I was up for some extractions and I immediately said yes. She also offers a Mermaid mini facial; back facials

VIEW FROM THE PORCH

EVE MARX



'I HOPE TO SEE YOU AGAIN ON THE PROM SOMETIME, NICKY OR NICOLE.'

that exfoliate and remove blackheads, as well as facials for men. The men's executive facial is a relaxing steam and cleansing treatment. To book your appointment, call or text 971-320-0624, or log on to www.bookseaside-massage.com/facials.

The week between Christmas and New Year's, I took a lot of walks. The young dog and I were both getting fat from an abundance of holiday food. We walked in the Cove and on the Prom; one day while we were walking, we met a New York City dog. It was a small dog, attached to a 30-something woman who told me she and her husband live in Manhattan on Eleventh Street. I was dumbfounded. This is not something that happens to

me every day.

I told her once upon a time I lived in the city only a few blocks from where she lived. I told her I'd lived on Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village and we discussed all the not-so-wonderful changes to that part of the city including the recent closing of a famous place called The Cornelia Street Café, popular for 41 years. She said prior to moving to 11th Street, she'd also lived on Cornelia.

"I loved that street. It was such a neighborhood. I should have just stayed there," she said.

She said she'd be in town for another week, but I knew odds were slim we'd cross paths. She said her husband is from Portland and his family, who mainly live in Portland, have a place in Seaside.

Despite an approximate 30 year difference in our ages, I really liked her and her dog. She said her name is Nicky or Nicole and she told me her last name, which I sadly forgot. Meanwhile, maybe someone in her husband's family is reading this and will pass it on.

I hope to see you again on the Prom sometime, Nicky or Nicole.

And that might happen, because you never know.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

TUESDAY, Jan. 22

Seaside Airport Advisory Committee, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

MONDAY, Jan. 28

Seaside City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

TUESDAY, Jan. 29

Gearhart Town Hall, 7 p.m., meeting on location of new fire station, Gearhart Fire Hall, 670 Pacific Way.

TUESDAY, Feb. 5

Seaside Community Center Commission, 10 a.m., Bob Chisholm Community Center, 1225 Avenue A.

Seaside Library Board, 4:30 p.m., Seaside Public Library, 1131 Broadway.

Seaside Planning Commission, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

WEDNESDAY, Feb. 6

Gearhart City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 698 Pacific Way.

THURSDAY, Feb. 7

Seaside Parks Advisory Committee, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway

MONDAY, Feb. 11

Seaside City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

WEDNESDAY, Feb. 13

Seaside Convention Center Commission, 5 p.m., Seaside Civic and Convention Center, 415 First. Ave.

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