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Nolan Walborn (1944–2018)

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Nolan Walborn died on Thursday the 22nd of February 2018.

Nolan Walborn, renowned expert on the spectral classification of hot, massive stars and member of the research staff at the Space Telescope Science Institute, died on 22 February 2018. Nolan was born 30 September 1944 in Bloomburg, Pennsylvania, to the Rev. George M. Walborn and Evelyn Loretta (Miller) Walborn. In 1953, his father accepted a posting to Argentina with the Lutheran Board of World Missions. While in Argentina, Nolan's mother, who had been a teacher prior to her marriage, oversaw the elementary education in English of her children via a USA-based correspondence school. Concurrently, the four siblings attended Argentine public schools, resulting in each of them becoming fully bilingual.

Nolan attended high school at the American Community School (ACS) in Buenos Aires. There, he was greatly inspired by his chemistry and physics teacher, who was also a PhD professor at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. After graduating valedictorian of his class, Nolan returned to the USA on his own to attend Gettysburg College.

Those who know of Nolan's work trajectory (including seven years at AURA's Cerro Tololo Observatory in La Serena, Chile) and astonishing body of peer-reviewed papers will have observed that throughout his career he was eager to collaborate with — and promote the careers of — many colleagues in Spanish-speaking countries. They, as well as lay audiences, were delighted by presentations and peer discussions Nolan would conduct in flawless Spanish.

Photo courtesy Space Telescope Science Institute.

Summaries of Nolan’s scientific achievements can be found on the STScI website at <https://www.stsci.edu/contents/newsletters/2018-volume-35-issue-01/in-memoriam-nolan-walborn> and <https://www.stsci.edu/news/announcements/nolan-walborn-a-tribute>.

The following is an extract from the tribute paid by his brother David at the memorial held in May 2018 by the Space Telescope Science Institute:

The question might arise as to what precursors there were to Nolan’s love of astronomy. As the person here to have known Nolan for the longest period of time, I feel I might be able to provide some answers.

During our missionary parents’ first five-year appointment to Argentina, Nolan’s eyes were already turned to things celestial. The two of us used to play a game where Nolan’s nine blue tin airplanes hovering over a picture of the New York skyline faced a horde of my red tin enemy planes arrayed on the field of play with the clear intent of attacking the city. Nolan played this game with his innate concentration and intensity. I don’t recall that my red invaders ever occupied any airspace over New York City much less “downed” any of Nolan’s blue aces which collected an ever-growing pile of red casualties on his side of the board. In fact, Nolan was very much into airplanes at that time, so much so that on our returning stateside for a year-long furlough, his soon-to-be Uncle Bill (who had been an Air Force air traffic controller) was bemused to find that there was little more he could add to Nolan’s already-extensive knowledge of the USAF fleet.

During our second five-year appointment, there was an air force base next to our town with a squadron of Gloster Meteors, early and only Allied jet fighters to see action in WWII, jet fighters Argentina had purchased second-hand from Britain. For several years Nolan became a plane-spotter who, at the sound of their approach, raced up a set of ladders to our flat roof there to observe the flight of the Gloster Meteors. This activity was rendered all the more fruitful by one pilot’s low passes over his girlfriend’s house in our part of town.

Nolan went on to Gettysburg College ahead of me, and there he enrolled in the Air Force ROTC program, completing a two-year stint during which it was unfortunately confirmed that his visual acuity — or lack thereof — absolutely, positively precluded him from ever being an Air Force pilot. Fortunately, he had also enrolled in a fallback position as a physics major and his advisor, another distinguished professor, Dr. Richard T. Mara, would be instrumental in convincing the Astronomy and Astrophysics Department at the University of Chicago that a

Summa Cum Laude physics undergraduate with no credits in astronomy from a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania could make it in the major leagues.

And so Nolan moved on to his fallback celestial career choice — Astrophysics. You all know in far greater detail than I exactly how well that worked out for him, and for the science itself.

Nolan had a love of classical music (instilled by his parents); and played trumpet in the Gettysburg College Marching Band. His siblings learned posthumously that he also danced a mean “Macarena”, and left a unique legacy in the world of astronomy by instilling that “skill” in others during international conferences.