Marc L. Kutner (1947–2020)

Kristine Larsen

Central Connecticut State University

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Radio astronomer and textbook author Marc Leslie Kutner left our community on Wednesday, June 10, 2020. He was 72.

Kutner was born in New York City on August 20, 1947. He received his A.B. in physics from Princeton University (1968) and Ph.D. from Columbia University (1972). His thesis, advised by Patrick Thaddeus, focused on mapping formaldehyde and silicon monoxide in ultra-dense clouds associated with star formation, what are now termed giant molecular clouds. His primary area of research through 2003 was more generally radio observations of molecular species in star forming regions in the Milky Way, M31, and Magellanic Clouds.

Kutner recounted in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* how the discovery of the cosmic microwave background radiation in 1965 made a powerful impact on the then undergraduate, and credits it with possibly influencing an impressive third of his graduating class of physics majors to become astronomers. A number of Kutner’s early scientific papers were done in collaboration with Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, such as using the 36-foot NRAO antenna at Kitt Peak to observe the 140-GHz formaldehyde line in the Trapezium region in M42. The collaboration resulted in the discovery of a variety of new interstellar molecular lines, for example from methanol and silicon monoxide. A second area of Kutner’s research was high precision observations of the cosmic background radiation at various millimeter wavelengths.

Following a postdoc at the NASA/Goddard Institute for Space Studies at Columbia University (1973–5), Kutner joined the faculty of the physics department of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He was promoted to full professor in 1989 and remained in the department through the late 1990s. By that time Kutner began voicing concerns with the state of academia. In a 1997 letter to *Physics Today* [1] he raised issues with proposed schemes to rank physics departments, and in a 1998 article in *Mercury* [2] reflected on what he considered to be “The Withering of Academic Freedom” in universities through streamlining measures that left faculty over-burdened and with few options in a climate of scarce academic positions. Kutner completed his academic career as a visiting professor in the astronomy department of the University of Texas-Austin.

Kutner retained strong roots to the local astronomical community, serving as Vice President (1986–90) and President (1990–95) of the Astronomical Society of New York. He also served many years on the Board of Directors of the Dudley Observatory in Schenectady, New York. Kutner was active in the IAU until his death, serving on a number of Divisions and Commissions related to radio astronomy and the interstellar medium as well as Division C Education, Outreach and Heritage.

References


For additional information see Kutner’s AstroGen entry.

References


