

How a childhood passion led Jim Bell to being named an ASU Regents Professor

Bell's work on imagers important part of NASA robotic missions

By Scott Bordow, ASU News

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In the early 1970s, in a rural town in the smallest state in the U.S., a young boy in elementary school began to imagine the wonders of space travel.

[Jim Bell](#) sat in the living room of his family's home in Coventry, Rhode Island, a community of 35,000 people located on the Pawtuxet River in the western part of the state, along the border of Connecticut.

Coventry's currency — its identity, really — is its history. It was incorporated in 1741 and grew around textile mills with names like Quidnick Village and Arkwright Village. One of the town's landmarks is the 1770 homestead of General Nathanael Greene, one of George Washington's most reliable officers during the Revolutionary War.

Bell, however, wasn't interested in what was. He was fascinated by what could be.

"On TV, they were driving cars around on the moon," Bell said. "That was just the coolest thing going on. It was amazing. And inspirational."

From a small screen in a small town, a life imagining vast possibilities began.

Bell, a professor in Arizona State University's School of Earth and Space Exploration, past president of the Planetary Society and a 2011 recipient of the Carl Sagan Medal for Excellence in Public Communication, has been named one of three Regents Professors for 2025.

Fewer than 3% of all ASU faculty carry the title, and those named must be recognized by peers nationally and internationally.

Meenakshi Wadwha, director of the School of Earth and Space Exploration, said Bell's work has "deepened our understanding of the geologic histories of planet Mars, the moon and asteroids through detailed imaging of their surfaces."

"He is also passionate about making his science accessible to the public and has been very engaged with broader advocacy efforts in support of planetary science and exploration," Wadwha said. "He has contributed tremendously to the international reputation and prominence of our planetary sciences program at Arizona State University."

Bell specializes in studying planetary geology, geochemistry and mineralogy, using data obtained from telescopes and imagers. He has been heavily involved in NASA robotic space exploration missions like the Mars rovers Spirit, Opportunity and Curiosity, and he leads the multispectral imager team on the Psyche spacecraft, which is led by principal investigator Lindy Elkins-Tanton and is on a six-year journey to reach a metal-rich asteroid of the same name.

"He understands the instrument, the optics and physics, and the data stream and analysis, as well as or better than anyone else in the world," said Elkins-Tanton, a Foundation and Regents Professor in the School of Earth and Space Exploration. "And he is absolutely clear about what reaches rigorous correctness and what needs more work. We know the images of the asteroid Psyche are in good hands with Jim and his team."

Bell's voyage into space, so to speak, began in earnest after he received his first telescope when he was 12 years old, a gift from his parents and grandparents. The skies above Coventry were pitch dark, and Bell would lug his telescope outside — it had an 8-inch diameter mirror — and gaze up at the stars.

"It was a great way to get out of the house," Bell said. "There was no internet. You couldn't sit around and goof off on devices. We actually had to do things."

Bell's parents, both blue-collar workers, weren't quite sure what to make of their son's interest.

"I think they were probably seriously worried," he said. "Like, 'What is this? He's never going to make a career out of this stuff.' I'm sure they thought I was kind of crazy."

What was a hobby became a passion when Bell started watching "Cosmos: A Personal Voyage," the 13-part television series in 1980–81 with Carl Sagan as the presenter.

"That was transformational to just a huge number of people in my generation because there was hardly any science on TV," Bell said. "So to have 13 weeks in a row of a guy with a funny

Manhattan accent actually speak plain English to people about what's going on out there was amazing."

To this day, Sagan's show inspires Bell. It's why he's an avid writer for space-related magazines and blogs, often does media interviews for space-related topics and speaks before public and academic audiences.

His science and space photography books include "Postcards from Mars," "Mars 3-D," "The Space Book" and "The Interstellar Age."

Basically, if you want to know more about Mars, Bell is the guy to call.

"Part of it is a little bit of pay it forward, right?" Bell said. "And part of it is just the realization that almost everything we do is publicly funded. So if I can't explain what I'm doing and where my grandmother's or neighbor's tax dollars are going, why the hell should they pay for it?"

Bell received his Bachelor of Science in planetary science and aeronautics in 1987 from the California Institute of Technology. He likes to say that he "barely graduated," but then tells this joke:

"What do they call the person who graduates last in their class with a PhD at Caltech?"

Pause.

"A doctor."

For a small-town boy who had never been west of Florida, moving to Los Angeles and attending Caltech was "jarring."

"There's lot of kids from everywhere in the world and all around the country," he said. "It was really an eye-opening experience. I had read about Los Angeles and seen it on TV shows, and then all of a sudden, I'm plopped right in the middle of it."

Bell quickly found his people, studying and becoming friends with students who shared the same interest in space, space travel and a few harmless pranks. One, in particular, Bell recalls.

"We had a student parking area for students with cars, and it was right next to a faculty parking area," Bell said. "Some of the parking spots had a faculty member's name. So once in a while, you'd go to park and nothing was available, but professor so-and-so hasn't parked there in weeks and weeks.

"So somebody took the spot, and I won't say the professor's name, but he was a Nobel Prize winner, and he would call the campus police and they would tow the car away. And we were like,

'Come on, how about a little understanding?' But no, this person was very short-fused.

"So one night we went out there and repainted the parking lot and the white lines with a slightly wider width. So all of the other faculty had their parking spots, but this particular faculty spot was gone. It was like it was never there."

And how did the professor react?

"He was so irate," Bell said. "We actually got a lecture from the president of the university."

Bell got his big break while working toward his PhD in planetary geosciences in 1992 from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. NASA was expanding its missions into space and needed younger workers who were well-versed in instrumentation. He was named a fellow in NASA's Graduate Student Researchers Program, and a career was born.

"I was in the right place at the right time," he said.

Bell, who will turn 60 in July, can't imagine a life without the work he's doing, nor does he plan on retiring anytime soon. He said he had a colleague a few years ago who retired and told people to come to his office late on a Friday afternoon and take anything they wanted. Anything leftover, he said, he would toss into a dumpster.

"That's not me. I'm not going to do that," Bell said. "I'll probably just hang around, be useful and try not to be an annoying old man. I still love helping students and writing books, and I would love to be able to follow along with ways to get our message across about why what we're doing is important for our current times as well as the future."

It's not often a young boy in a small town discovers a world beyond his reach and then spends a lifetime exploring it. Bell looked up at the stars one day and has never looked down.

"The word I often use is blessed," he said. "I know what hopes and dreams that my siblings and cousins had since they were little, and most of them didn't get to live those.

"So I'm fortunate. Very, very fortunate."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Jim Bell is one of three new Regents Professors at Arizona State University for 2025. Photo courtesy of Academic Enterprise Communications