Astronaut and former UC Irvine postdoc Tracy Dyson returns to campus after latest NASA mission

Dyson was conducting air quality research with AirUCI when she got a fateful call from NASA.

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NASA astronaut Tracy Dyson recounts her time in space to a packed audience at UC Irvine.

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Steve Zylius / UC Irvine

On January 15, former UC Irvine postdoctoral fellow and current NASA astronaut Tracy Dyson delivered a public talk on campus after returning from her latest mission aboard the International Space Station. As a postdoc, Dyson worked with professors Barbara Finlayson-Pitts and John Hemminger studying how to measure exotic air pollutants as part of the Atmospheric Integrated Research (AIR) group – and it was on campus at UC Irvine that she got the call from NASA letting her know she had been selected for the 1998 class of astronauts. “When I got the call, I was in such disbelief that I started to hyperventilate,” Dyson told the packed auditorium at UC Irvine’s Beckman Center. She recalled how the officer who called her said, as she continued to hyperventilate, “‘How about I call you back, give you some time to calm down?’” And now, over twenty years later, Dyson points to UC Irvine as the place where her journey to space truly began. It’s a journey that, on her most recent visit to the ISS, saw her help perform scientific experiments involving growing heart tissues in zero gravity, as well as perform a spacewalk before making her way back to Earth and, eventually, to UC Irvine. “Though I only spent a year here, the roots I got to establish here have been long-lasting and it’s made every trip home after every space flight that much sweeter,” Dyson said of her time as a postdoc. After her lecture, an audience member asked Dyson how to go about becoming an astronaut. Dyson’s reply: “Whatever you’re doing in life, enjoy it. Do it with passion. When you enjoy what you’re doing, the best of you comes out. The results are going to be fabulous, because there’s a piece of you in it.”

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