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Michel Colson

SERA MARKOFF '89

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Like many kids, Sera Markoff '89 loved science fiction. Authors like Madeleine L'Engle, Larry Niven, and Robert Heinlein were favorites—writers who explored facets of the universe she'd never considered before.

She went on to explore her own possibilities—moving to Boston for a physics degree at MIT, spending a year researching cosmology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, earning a Ph.D. in theoretical astrophysics at the University of Arizona, and then spending three years doing post-doctoral work in Germany.

Today, as an associate professor at the Astronomical Institute Anton Pannekoek at the University of Amsterdam, she's made teaching students about the universe her lifetime pursuit. In addition to her courses in high-energy astrophysics and cosmology, she studies the processes that occur around black holes, which played an important role both in the early universe and today. “I like to tell people I get paid to do science fiction, which is a joke—but not too far from the truth,” she says.

Although she didn't get serious about the field until she got to MIT, she traces the roots of her success back to her days at SPA, where she was fascinated by philosophy and “weird ideas,” which she was able to explore with math teacher Bob Drechsel, who also ran a philosophy club for students. She adds that her six years of Latin with David Sims gave her the foundation to learn new languages rapidly—a useful skill in an international field like astrophysics, where many prestigious academic institutions are in non-English speaking countries.

But most important, she says, SPA was a place where she could be herself. That she never felt like she had to sacrifice her personal style while she pursued her interests, she says, was an incredible confidence-builder, and gave her the foundation to succeed in a very competitive discipline in which women are rare. “SPA was all about learning and respect for learning, and that was an environment I really thrived in,” she says. “It honestly never occurred to me—either at SPA or afterwards—that I couldn't do anything that interested me.”