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Last Updated: 7:29 am | Tuesday, April 4, 2006

NKU senior finds niche in astrobiology

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

When Northern Kentucky University senior Ariel Bennett presented her research to the Astrobiology Science Conference 2006 last week in Washington, D.C., she was one of the few undergraduates to do so.

"What makes this award unique is that it is not commonly given to undergraduate students, and is more often geared toward students pursuing Ph.D.'s," said Hazel Barton, the Ashland Endowed Professor of Integrative Science and an assistant professor of biological sciences at NKU. "As far as the sciences program, I think it's just another recognition of the high level of research being carried out at NKU."

Travel for Bennett was paid for by NASA, the conference's sponsor.

Bennett's presentation, "The Use of ATR-FTIR Spectroscopy to Relate Metabolic Activities to Biogeochemical Signatures in Rock," is the culmination of a summer of research. Bennett cautions that her research hasn't reached a conclusion yet, but said "It appears that organisms in starved environments form very complex networks to increase the metabolic efficiency to scavenge as many nutrients as possible. This is a radically different view from classical ecological perspective where each organism outcompetes similar organisms for energy sources ... That's the whole idea of the food chain."

The 1998 Covington Latin graduate and Children's Hospital nurse is a self-described "space geek." Her grandfather worked for NASA and she wrote her high school thesis on a Martian meteorite, ALH84001. In August, her inner "space geek" was awakened by a class - medical microbiology - she was taking in pursuit of her bachelor's degree in nursing.

"I took the class which was taught by Dr. Barton and fell in love with the subject. At this point in time, I had no idea she was an astrobiologist, or even what she researched. I just knew I enjoyed her class immensely and enjoyed talking to her and was curious to see where it might lead in the future," Bennett said. Bennett will be doing research this summer at NASA Ames Research Center in California and after graduation plans to pursue her Ph.D.

Other conference presenters include graduate students from Stanford, the University of California, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Washington and Brown.

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