Prestigious Irish scientific award for NASA's Voyager missions chief scientist

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PHOTOGRAPHS: For video and images from NASA's Voyager missions, see: http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/imagesvideo/index.html

As NASA's Voyager missions appear to have reached the very edge of our solar system, the project scientist on the missions has been recognised with a prestigious Irish scientific award. The Voyager missions to explore interstellar space are one of society's most ambitious projects – already they have travelled further than any other man-made object, yet are still sending scientific information about their surroundings.

The project scientist on the missions, Edward C Stone, has this week been awarded the 2013 O'Ceallaigh medal for his outstanding contribution to cosmic physics. Prof Stone, a former director of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and scientific director of NASA's Voyager missions, is also a professor of physics at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech).

The presentation was made at the opening of this year's International Cosmic Ray Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, this week [July 3] and made by the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP), which is also responsible for selecting the winners of the biennial award. Prof Stone is talking about Voyager in one of the key-note talks at the Rio meeting.

Speaking from Rio de Janeiro, Prof Luke Drury, head of Cosmic Physics at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS), said he was delighted that the medal had been given to such an inspiring scientist. "This project captured people's imagination and, 36 years after its launch, is still sending scientific information from deep space. It's a tremendous achievement for science and engineering and humanity, and we are delighted to be able to recognise it with this award. "

The award is given in memory of the late Prof Cormac O'Ceallaigh, a brilliant Irish physicist who in the 1950s worked on the discovery of strange particles in cosmic rays, and is associated with the discovery of the K meson. He worked at Cambridge, Paris and Bristol before returning to Dublin in 1953 as head of cosmic ray science at DIAS. The O'Ceallaigh medal was established in 1999 by his family and DIAS to honour "outstanding contributions to cosmic ray physics".

The twin Voyager 1 and 2 spacecraft were launched in 1977, and are continuing to explore where nothing from Earth has flown before. While some say they have "left the solar system", NASA scientists more cautiously describe them as being "in the Heliosheath - the outermost layer of the heliosphere where the solar wind is slowed by the pressure of interstellar gas".

Both spacecraft are still sending scientific information about their surroundings through the Deep Space Network (DSN). Now 36 years into their odyssey, they each are much farther from Earth and the Sun than Pluto.

The primary mission was the exploration of Jupiter and Saturn. After making a string of discoveries there -- such as active volcanoes on Jupiter's moon Io and intricacies of Saturn's rings -- the mission was extended. Voyager 2 went on to explore Uranus and Neptune, and is still the only spacecraft to have visited those outer planets. The adventurers' current mission, the Voyager Interstellar Mission (VIM), will explore the outermost edge of the Sun's domain. And beyond.

For further information: contact Professor Luke Drury, Director of the School of Cosmic Physics at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, ld@cp.dias.ie

About DIAS: the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, founded in 1940, is Ireland's premier independent research institute, with schools of Cosmic Physics, Theoretical Physics, and Celtic Studies. www.dias.ie.

About the Voyager missions:
http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/

About Prof Edward Stone: http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/news/profiles/stone/stone_index.html

The International Cosmic Ray Conference 2013:
http://www.cbpf.br/~icrc2013/

More about Prof Cormac O'Ceallaigh:
http://www.rds.ie/index.jsp?a=781&n=245&p=182

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