

## Janet Akyüz Mattei

Janet Akyüz Mattei, director of the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO) for more than 30 years, died on 22 March 2004 in Boston after a valiant battle against acute myelogenous leukemia. Her passing generated an outpouring of remembrances of Janet from professional and amateur astronomers around the world.

Born Janet Hanula Akyüz on 2 January 1943, in Bodrum, Turkey, she was the eldest of five children. She came to the US in 1962 to attend Brandeis University, where she received a BA in general science in 1965. Janet returned to Brandeis in 1968 to spend a summer at the Maria Mitchell Observatory in a program directed for many years by Dorrit Hoffleit. That summer, she became acquainted with variable stars, the AAVSO, and her future husband, active AAVSO member and optics specialist Michael Mattei. She earned master's degrees from Ege University in Turkey (1970) and the University of Virginia in Charlottesville (1972), and subsequently took a position as assistant to the director of the AAVSO.

A year later, Janet became director of the AAVSO when the director retired. At the time, the organization occupied cramped quarters near the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Founded in 1911 under the auspices of Harvard College Observatory, the AAVSO had become independent in 1954. During Janet's tenure, the international, nonprofit association grew from a small, history-rich but resource-poor organization that received 150 000 variable star observations annually and managed them entirely on paper to a fully modern, well-endowed organization that electronically processes 450 000 variable star observations yearly, operates the AAVSO international database, and provides real-time support to space- and ground-based observatories. Janet also oversaw the expansion of the headquarters staff and, thanks to the generosity of long-time member Clinton B. Ford, the acquisition of AAVSO's own building.

From the 1980s on, the AAVSO's traditional area of strength—observing variables over a very long timeline—was expanded under Janet's leadership through several new programs reflecting advances in the field. The first was monitoring cataclysmic variables and immediately alerting astronomers to eruptions so they could begin space- and ground-based observations. An-



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other was a program to pinpoint the sources of gamma-ray burst optical afterglows. In 1982, she earned her PhD in astronomy, under adviser Sezai Hazer, from Ege University for an analysis of long-term AAVSO data on dwarf novae.

Janet opened the door for serious amateur observers to contribute to astronomy. She recognized the value of their contributions and the effort represented by tens of thousands of observations from individual observers who worked voluntarily on their own time and equipment. She also took a personal interest in each AAVSO member and observer. In a 2003 radio interview with amateur astronomer David H. Levy, taped shortly before she was diagnosed with her final illness, she said that when she saw an observation and the observer's initials attached, she could picture that person at a telescope making the observation.

Education, especially of young people, was a passion of Janet's. A number of professional astronomers began their careers at the AAVSO or were mentored by Janet. She codeveloped a successful curriculum to teach the scientific learning process and mathematics through variable star observing and was active in United Nations international astronomy education programs.

Janet's enthusiasm for nature extended beyond astronomy to include flowers, particularly wildflowers, and at meetings people would vie for the opportunity to show her a new one. She delighted attendees at one AAVSO general meeting with a computer slide presentation featuring flowers that faded into astronomical objects with similar form and color. Her office was bright with a mixture of flower photos, astronomical photos,

and the many awards she accepted, she said, “on behalf of the observers and members of the AAVSO.”

Hundreds of amateur and professional astronomers around the world whose lives and work she had touched followed Janet’s last illness through e-mail bulletins sent by Mario Motto, a cardiologist, AAVSO member, and friend of Janet and Michael Mattei’s. During the few weeks between the initial and final rounds of treatment, she used much of her time and most of her energy contacting friends and colleagues worldwide to thank them for their good wishes. The AAVSO website posted more than 200 messages from individuals who remembered her as a friend, mentor, colleague, role model, scientist, and leader. She was that rare combination: a fine scientist and a warm, enthusiastic person who could inspire those she met, even if only once.

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