

Citation for Kirby Runyon '08  
Houghton College Young Alumnus of the Year  
Homecoming Chapel, October 5, 2018

Kirby Runyon first walked through the doors of the Michigan Space and Science Center as a wide-eyed three year old. That childhood visit developed into a passion for space exploration and for sharing with others the wonders of the greater universe.

Kirby's dream of becoming an astronaut followed him to Houghton. Dr. Mark Yuly, professor of physics and associate dean for mathematics and natural sciences at Houghton, recalls several occasions when Kirby wore a NASA jumpsuit to class. "He was excited about science in general," Dr. Yuly recalls. "[Kirby] was probably the most enthusiastic student I ever had." According to Dr. Yuly, that enthusiasm was once demonstrated in Kirby's determination to photograph stars from the soccer field. Kirby hooked together every extension cord in the physics department to power his telescope.

Kirby, a 2008 Houghton graduate, was well known on campus for his commitment to studying physics. According to fellow 2008 graduate Eric Stephenson "[Kirby had a] drive and ambition that few classmates matched. He always seemed like he was in the middle of a discovery." Fellow students would comment on Kirby's constant studying and his persistence to succeed – particularly in a course load that continually challenged him.

An encourager by nature, Kirby inspired others with his wonder, curiosity and enthusiasm. Kurt Aikens, a 2009 graduate and now a Houghton College assistant professor of physics, was heavily influenced by Kirby's love of space, and as a result pursued his graduate studies in aeronautics and astronautics. "Kirby is one of the most infectiously passionate people I have ever known," Dr. Aikens says. He remembers huddling around a computer monitor with fellow space enthusiasts, at Kirby's prompting, for a "NASA viewing party" - that is, watching launches of shuttles, satellites, and other spacecraft headed out of the atmosphere.

Kirby was also recognized for his Christ-like attitude towards everyone around him. "I cannot remember one story I heard about Kirby that involved him acting unkind, mean, or apathetic towards anyone," Eric Stevenson reflects. "He seemed happy to be with others and to share with those around him whatever discoveries life had to offer."

After Houghton, Kirby continued his education at Western Michigan University, then earned a Master's degree in Planetary Geology from Temple University. He completed his PhD in Planetary Geology at Johns Hopkins University, where he is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Applied Physics Laboratory. He is involved with basic research on the geologic forces that shape the landscapes of planets, moons, and asteroids, mainly using images and related data from NASA and international robotic spacecraft. Specifically, Kirby is a planetary geomorphologist with expertise in wind-blown geology on Mars, Titan, and Pluto. His work also examines the effects of impact cratering throughout the solar system, and structural geology of tectonic faults on planets and moons.

He participates on the science teams of active and proposed spacecraft missions, including *New Horizons*, which explored Pluto and Charon in 2015 and will fly past “Ultima Thule” on New Year’s Day, 2019, reconnoitering the farthest-explored world in the solar system. His work with *New Horizons* led Kirby to become the first person – as far as he knows – to discover mountains on Pluto. Kirby chairs the geology science theme group for the proposed Interstellar Probe mission, which would notionally fly past several planets and worlds on its way out of the solar system to explore the physical environment between the stars.

As evidenced by Kirby’s many vocational pursuits, he remains fascinated by the universe and worlds beyond our own - even serving as a volunteer spacesuit tester for NASA. He is passionate about the intersection of the Christian faith and science, and teaches a class at his church on the subject.

Kirby, you inspire others with your exuberance for your work and your faith. You ‘play in God’s backyard,’ as you once said, and you use your knowledge to educate others about the wonders of God’s creation beyond this planet. For dedication to your craft and embodying the ideals of a Houghton education, we are proud to present you with the 2018 Young Alumnus of the Year Award.