

Science scribe plays role in Mars mission

Fort Collins woman wrote educational material

BY PAT FERRIER • PATFERRIER@COLORADOAN.COM • JUNE 2, 2008

Laurie Schmidt has her eyes on the skies and her mind on Mars.

The Fort Collins-based freelance science writer held her breath along with scientists from NASA, the University of Arizona, which is running the project, the Jet Propulsion Lab and Lockheed Martin as the Phoenix lander opened its parachute and floated safely to surface of the red planet.

She has more than a passing interest in space and this mission.

Schmidt spent 10 months writing the educational component, Mars 101, for the Phoenix Mars Mission Web site.

What for scientists was a dream come true when the Phoenix landed safely - almost half of all previous missions to Mars have failed - was a science writer's dream as well, Schmidt said.

"It was one of the highlight moments of my life, and I only wrote content for the Web site.

"This is a turning point as far as space exploration, and to think I may have played a very small role in helping people understand it is the most exciting thing about my job."

It's her most high-profile job for sure — "Mars and space in general fascinates me," she said.

But she's also written about such cool things as volcano domes, forecasting hurricanes, the Tibetan Plateau, the largest and highest plateau on Earth with more than 17,000 glaciers, and what climate clues we can draw from the Arctic ice.

She's edited an Earth science publication based out of the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder and the bimonthly magazine the Natural Hazards Observer published by the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado.

Schmidt works full time when she finds something interesting, such as the job she left recently working for Natural Hazards Center, but it's the lure of being able to write about a variety of different topics that keeps her going back to freelancing.

"There are so many different subjects I want to write about ... that's why I decided to freelance full time. I can do a variety of projects."



An illustration shows the Phoenix lander. Science writer Laurie Schmidt of Fort Collins provided the educational component. (Corby Waste/NASA-JPL/The Associated Press)



A portion of the Phoenix Mars lander and the Martian surface are seen after Phoenix landed on the planet May 25. (University of Arizona/JPL-Caltech/NASA/AP)

INTERESTED?

To view pictures coming back from the Phoenix, visit <http://phoenix.jpl.arizona.edu>. To read Mars 101, click on the education portion of the Phoenix Web site.

While freelancing can be a challenging way to make a living, Schmidt said she feels very confident.

"I think it makes a difference where you've made a name for yourself. It's also important to specialize" in a few areas, otherwise writers can lose their credibility, she said.

Doug Lombardi, former education and public outreach manager for the Phoenix project, said Schmidt's ability to make complex science topics accessible to a public audience was "essential for the site's success."



SCHMIDT

> **Home:** Fort Collins

> **Education:** Bachelor's degree in English, minor in physical geography; master's degree in journalism/science communication from Colorado State University

> **On the Internet:** www.lschmidtsciwrite.com
