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Alumni Profile

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Searching for questions



Landon Curt Noll '83 knows firsthand the power of a volcano. Over the years, he's seen pumice stones

dance on the rumbling ground around him and heard mountainside subwoofers crank out intense harmonics.

"Volcanoes send shock waves through your body like being at a rock concert," he described. "These are places very few people can get to, so the emotional impact is quite enormous."

Noll has made a career exploring remote locations in the name of science. Now an astronomer and technical computing advisor for Cisco Systems, he studies volcanoes and visits regions deep in the Antarctic to search for meteorites. Whether he's gathering ash from the rim of the Kilauea volcano or searching for meteorites buried in the ice, he is always asking questions.

"We're doing research where the answers aren't in the back of the text book," he said. "We don't even know if we're asking the right questions. But one person's noise is another person's data."

At Linfield, Noll learned to ask questions, marvel at discoveries and even celebrate his ignorance.

"That's all part of that Linfield experience," he said. "Understanding you're ignorant is the beginning of acquiring knowledge. When I was a student, we had nine planets in our solar system and no idea how to look for others. Turns out, we were only looking at 4 percent of the universe we knew back then."

Noll began his accomplished science career at an early age. At 18, he became the youngest person to break the record for the largest known prime, and he's held or co-held eight world records relating to large prime numbers. He is founder of the International Obfuscated C Code Contest as well as co-inventor for a system for naming arbitrarily large pow-



Landon Curt Noll '83 has taken part in three expeditions to Antarctica/South Pole in search of meteorites buried in the ice. In March, he traveled to the North Pole for a total solar eclipse to look for asteroids close to the sun. He hopes to continue the search in Eastern Oregon during the Aug. 21, 2017 eclipse, the same eclipse that will pass over Linfield.

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While still in high school, Noll attended the University of California, Berkeley, and it was professors there who directed him to Linfield and the Linfield Research Institute for a more personalized experience. The broad base and solid core of science was a perfect fit for Noll.

"I had keys, an office, full access to labs and I was expected to work," he said. "That was an amazing experience. I worked right there alongside professors."

Noll said the hands-on, personalized experience had a direct effect on his career. A math and physics double major, a number of classes outside his focus have proven crucial over the years. He studied geophysics and nuclear physics with Bob Jones. His meteorology instruction with the late Professor John Day has been put to use many times including in 2013, while sailing south of the Cape Verde Islands in the

mid-Atlantic Ocean. There he assisted in finding a hole in the clouds for 53 seconds to see an eclipse.

Clancy Hinrichs '57, professor emeritus of physics, recalled the close working relationship he shared with Noll and other physics students.

"Landon was an extremely innovative student," Hinrichs said. "He was very bright and creative about his work."

That innovation and creativity is being put to good use, most recently in March when Noll traveled to the North Pole for a total solar eclipse – the perfect opportunity to look for asteroids close to the sun.

"We haven't found volcanoid asteroids right next to the sun but we keep looking," he said. "Do they exist? We don't know yet. If they aren't there, then why not? The answer, when we find it, won't be as exciting as the next question. Science is all about questions."

– Laura Davis