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News Release

SOFIA COMPLETES FIRST TEST FLIGHT; FILMED FOR PLANETARIUM SHOW

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NASA STRATOSPHERIC OBSERVATORY FOR INFRARED ASTRONOMY (SOFIA) COMPLETES FIRST TEST FLIGHT

UT ARLINGTON PROFESSOR AND PLANETARIUM DIRECTOR FILMED FLIGHT FOR NEW PLANETARIUM SHOW

ARLINGTON—The University of Texas at Arlington Associate Professor of Physics Manfred Cuntz, whose work with NASA on finding life in the universe is featured in the UT Arlington planetarium show “Cosmic CSI”, has received another NASA Education and Outreach Grant to develop a new planetarium show. The new show is tentatively titled “SOFIA and the Cool Cosmos.”

This grant, awarded by the NASA Ames Research Center at Moffett Field, Calif., will be used to develop a show on the Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA). SOFIA is the world’s largest airborne observatory consisting of an 8.2-foot diameter telescope built into a converted Boeing 747SP. Peering out through an open cavity in the side of the aircraft, the telescope will allow astronomers to obtain sharper infrared images than ever before. It will focus on the mid-and far infrared of the light spectrum invisible to the human eye and ground-based observatories. SOFIA’s operating altitude will be at or above 41,000 feet, thus avoiding 99 percent of the obscuring water vapor.

SOFIA completed its first test flight in Waco on April 26. Cuntz and Joe Eakin, interim director of the Planetarium at UT Arlington, were on hand for the test flight and shot HD footage of the SOFIA take-off and landing for the new planetarium production. This show will provide audiences with a new perspective of the universe, seeing stars in a new light. “SOFIA and the Cool Cosmos” will focus on how astronomers use the entire light spectrum to study the universe. It will also present astronomers’ tools to discover planets around distant stars. Additionally, the show will discuss the history and hardships of the SOFIA project, from conception to the temporary loss of funding to the first successful flight and its bright future.

The SOFIA project was awarded by NASA in 1996 to a combined U.S. and German team that include L-3 Communications in Waco, the German Aerospace Center in Cologne, Germany, and the Universities Space Research Association (USRA). USRA is a nonprofit consortium of universities established in 1969 by the National Academy of Sciences and now comprises 101 member universities, including UT Arlington. The consortium’s mission includes the advancement of space-related sciences and exploration through innovative research, technology and educational programs. More information about USRA can be found at <http://www.usra.edu>. For more information on SOFIA, visit <http://www.sofia.usra.edu>.

Eakin said he expects the new planetarium show to be completed March 2008.

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