Star-gazing Smithie goes to Washington, D.C.

By: Sarah Fitzgibbons

Posted: 4/7/11

Even though she can't think of "anything more terrifying than public speaking," Lauren "Izzy" Masiunas '12 has been doing quite a bit of it lately. Maisunas is one of 74 undergraduate students who will present research "Posters on the Hill" in Washington, DC as part of the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR).

Maisunas' research is on how new stars are formed, based on data collected by the Spitzer Space Telescope that trails Earth's orbit and the Kitt Peak National Observatory. Says Maisunas, "Stars like the sun form near sibling stars in

clusters, created from gravitational contractions in the densest regions of molecular clouds.... By studying this, we will be able to determine what happens with stars during the first moments of their life, the period when they are forming planets. This project studies new stars, many of which could form planets that could foster or even create life."

The junior's passion for astronomy developed early in life, through decidedly less advanced technologies. "One day, my dad and I rented Carl Sagan's Cosmos. It was a series that came on a bunch of VHS tapes, and by the time they had gotten rid of their VHS collection, those particular tapes were pretty worn out and fuzzy to watch. It really taught me about the scope of things. The universe is huge! So I wondered how people could study things as small as one miniscule thing on one tiny planet in the whole universe," says Masiunas, crediting her father with encouraging her interest.

"My dad got me a star chart and a little telescope that we could set up in the backyard, and I've been stargazing ever since."

For the CUR event on April 13, Masiunas will present her research on star formation to some representative and senators, as well as members of their staffs. Maisunas presented her research to the American Astronomical Society in January, but says that she had to change some things for the legislative audience: "I've basically rewritten most of my poster. It's pretty hard to try to think about what your audience doesn't know and what they do. You end up walking a fine line between explanation and condescension." She hopes that the program will demonstrate the importance of funding undergraduate research in the sciences.

To students interested in astronomy, Masiunas' familiarity and early start may seem intimidating, but she encourages Smithies to get involved. "Smith has a great summer research program and a great astronomy department. Do take classes with them and, if you're interested, try your hand at astronomical research. It's mind-boggling. My first week in to my research, I pressed a few buttons and out popped an image full of stars no one had ever seen before," she says, adding, "That's what I get to do: discover new places and new worlds that maybe one day we'll get to go explore."
