

Astrophysicist and Science Communicator visits the Hunter to speak about Indigenous Astronomy

It's a big canvas that is always changing.

But that hasn't deterred Kirsten Banks from being a keen student of the night sky with all its myths and mysteries.

"It is such a challenging field of study," says Banks, who has been fascinated by the stories contained within the stars and wider universe ever since her relationship with Aboriginal astronomy started in her first year of tertiary education, around the same time she started working at Sydney Observatory.

"I learned about the Great Celestial Emu and found a new appreciation for the sky and the cosmos."

"The Emu constellation is very different to all the other constellations, because instead of being forged with the bright spots in the sky, the dark clouds of our Milky Way galaxy manifest this huge emu in the sky."

"I just love talking about its meaning within Aboriginal culture and explaining to people where they can find it on a good night."

"Since then, I've delved into learning more about Australia's great astronomical history and joined a group of Aboriginal astronomy researchers."

Kirsten Banks was the guest speaker at an Indigenous Astronomy evening at Christ Church, Mt Vincent, west of Kurri Kurri on Saturday night.

"Plans for an observatory and planetarium at Munibung Hill in Lake Macquarie would be a fantastic asset for local communities," says Banks.

A Wiradjuri woman with a passion for space and astronomy, she was a 2017 CSIRO Indigenous Stem award finalist.

"Once you look past the stars with a telescope, you can see many more amazing objects. Nebula, massive clouds of interstellar dust and gas creating groups of thousands of stars, dwarfed by globular star clusters sporting millions of stars!"

"Wow, it's just fantastic."

"If you were to ask me what my favourite part of astronomy was, I would say without a doubt: 'you can never stop learning.'"

"After learning about astronomy, my second love is talking about astronomy."

"Our universe is precisely 5% atoms – or "sparkly stuff", as one of my favourite astronomers calls it – and the other 95% is composed of dark matter and dark energy."

"You'll have to come to one of my talks if you want to find out more," Banks says with a grin, who at one time with a colleague called herself a Skyentist.

Kirsten Banks has appeared on ABC radio and television, written stories for The Guardian and IndigeousX, featured in news reports in the Sydney Morning Herald, The Australian and COSMOS magazine and been guest speaker at numerous venues across Australia. She was also a guest speaker at the Sydney Vivid Festival in June talking about: The Story of Light – Celebrating Australia's Largest Optical Telescope. If you are into social media you can follow her on Twitter with the handle @AstroKirsten.

Not for publication

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