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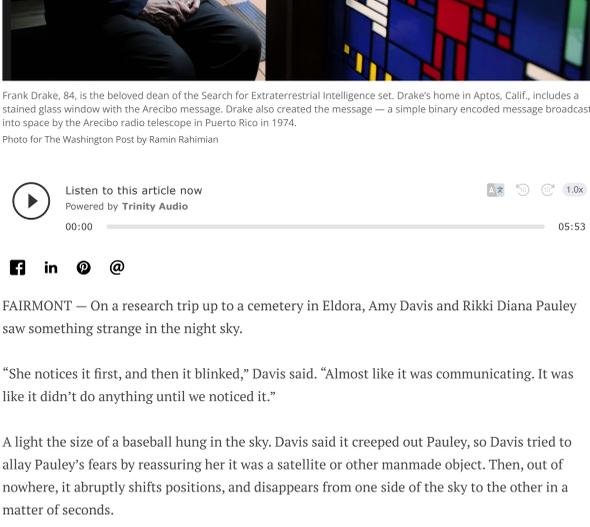
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THE UNKNOWN

WVU researcher dreams of what's possible in deep space

By Esteban Fernandez | Times West Virginian Feb 14, 2026



Frank Drake, 84, is the beloved dean of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence set. Drake's home in Aptos, Calif., includes a stained glass window with the Arecibo message. Drake also created the message — a simple binary encoded message broadcast into space by the Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico in 1974.

Photo for The Washington Post by Ramin Rahimian

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FAIRMONT — On a research trip up to a cemetery in Eldora, Amy Davis and Rikki Diana Pauley saw something strange in the night sky.

"She notices it first, and then it blinked," Davis said. "Almost like it was communicating. It was like it didn't do anything until we noticed it."

A light the size of a baseball hung in the sky. Davis said it crept out Pauley, so Davis tried to allay Pauley's fears by reassuring her it was a satellite or other manmade object. Then, out of nowhere, it abruptly shifts positions, and disappears from one side of the sky to the other in a matter of seconds.

"Then Rikki's like, 'OK, we need to leave,'" Davis said. "I don't know, it was like messing with us."

Davis said they no longer saw the mysterious light after they left the cemetery, but the encounter lingers in her mind.

Davis and Pauley are not alone when it comes to state residents who have encountered something mysterious in the sky.

According to the [Alien Abduction Odds Index 2026](#), compiled by Canada Sports Betting and sourced from data sets collected by the National UFO Reporting Center, Canadian UFO Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, Statistics Canada and Centers for Disease Control, West Virginia is the No. 12 hotspot when it comes to alien encounters. Residents have a 1 in 72 chance of seeing something mysterious. New Hampshire leads the country, with 1 in 50 experiencing an encounter.

UFOs and aliens often make for fun, poorly punned fodder for news agencies searching for a story on a slow news day. But there's an allure among the public for the mysterious things that sometimes appear among the stars.

"Maybe it's the call of the void," Davis said. "How you're drawn to things that are unknown. Maybe it's something like that too, because it's with ghosts, aliens or Bigfoot, there's so much proof that it's there but you can still say, 'Well maybe not.' I would say it has something to do with wanting to know the unknown."

In other words, the romance of mystery, she said.

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Within the realm of known science, crossing the void between stars presents massive engineering and technological challenges which would require a civilization to have a mastery over physics that far surpasses humanity's. The "Tyranny of the Rocket" equation alone is a massive hurdle. It simply states that to go faster, more fuel is needed. More fuel means more weight, which in turn means more fuel to push the added weight. And so on and so forth. Under current technology, rockets are around 85% propellant by mass. Crossing interstellar distances is an unsolvable problem for current space technology.

Searching for extraterrestrial life is another matter.

Armed with state of the art telescopes, McWilliams said scientists deployed a technique called spectroscopy to read what elements are present in an atmosphere, including oxygen. The technology scientists use has gotten so good, McWilliams said, it can even be used on small planets with atmospheres. Previously, telescopes could only resolve the atmospheres from much larger planets like gas giants or stars.

"It's also just, 'boy, wouldn't that be cool,'" he said. "I think it's generally kind of impractical considerations, because, I always think of it, as if there was another civilization out there that was capable of getting to us, they're so far beyond us it would be like a kid encountering an ant hill. How much care do you think he's going to take to keep the ants safe? They wouldn't really view us as life on their own level, so it's probably a less fun and thrilling interaction, but that's my own personal setup."

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"We're sort of right on the cusp of being able to confidently identify places where we think intelligent life might be," McWilliams said.

McWilliams said there are proposals for missions that would detect more extrasolar planets. Before it was retired, the Kepler space telescope discovered over 2,300 planets orbiting distant stars. Kepler searched for the wobble imposed by a planet on its parent star through their gravitational connection.

There's also the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, a private nonprofit which uses state of the art radio telescopes to sweep the night sky for signals originating from another planet.

McWilliams said as a theoretical astrophysicist, imagination is 90% of his job. When it comes to extraterrestrials, so far humanity only knows one pathway to actually go outside and find something new, you have to be able to use them it's beyond, but to anything you've experienced. That's not always an easy thing to do."

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"Life was only in water for a long time here, there's no reason it had to necessarily go on land to become intelligent," he said. "There are plenty of things in the ocean that are quite intelligent, and things that we don't even understand how they're intelligent, like octopi with no centralized brain."

McWilliams said great discoveries live outside the current body of knowledge, which means imagination is paramount to scientific inquiry.

"If you lack imagination, you're limited to the things you know right now," he said. "You can play with them and you can use them and it's great, but to anything you've experienced. That's not always an easy thing to do."

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