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Classroom Pass gets fired up in astronomy class

9:30 a.m.: General Astronomy, Van Allen Hall

BY: BRITTANY BORGHI | 2014.11.03 | 10:12 AM

A student in General Astronomy ignites a fireball at the front of class. Photos by Bill Adams.

Classroom Pass is an Iowa Now *project that sent teams of writers, photographers, and videographers to 15 classes on Wednesday, Oct. 22, to showcase the breadth and strength of the University of Iowa's academic offerings for undergraduates as well as its dynamic faculty and state-of-the-art facilities.* See what other classes they visited.

Class: General Astronomy
Instructor: Robert Mutel, professor of physics and astronomy

When Tyler Stercula walks into class, he's not expecting to hold a candle to a hydrogen-filled balloon and ignite a giant fireball in front of his startled classmates—but that's what he does, with four different gases.

This is how Professor Robert Mutel likes to teach General Astronomy (following safety protocols, of course).

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In another moment, Mutel resembles a magician calling for his assistant. He pulls open a door on the side of the classroom, and out pops Instructional Resource Specialist Dale Stille in a rainbow tie–dye lab coat. Stille loads a slide of primordial–like pond scum into a videographic microscope, and eukaryotic organisms dance on a TV screen in the corner of the room while Mutel breaks down the basics of how life evolved on Earth.

Dale Stille, instructional resource specialist, assists in Professor Robert Mutel's astronomy class.

"I like to blow things up, and show them the pond scum and all the animals floating around in it, and give them the sense that that's what the world is that they live in," says Mutel, who has been on the Iowa faculty since 1975.

His students—half astronomy majors and half not—are excited to learn more.

"I think the class is an insanely awesome class. It's taught me so much so far," says Devin Parker, a first–year student from Washington, Iowa.

Mutel gives students an even closer look at their world by extending instruction outside of the classroom. He invites the first 10 students who sign up to a Star Party on Saturday. He'll pick up the students at Van Allen Hall, and take them to his house 10 miles outside of Iowa City for dinner—and a closer look into the Milky Way.

Stercula, a first–year student from West Chester, Pennsylvania, who is studying creative writing and astronomy, signs up right away.

"I obviously love the material, so I might be a little biased, but I love it," Stercula says.

Learn more about the university's Department of Physics and Astronomy, and find out about the late James Van Allen, a UI astrophysicist who shared Time *magazine's Man of the Year honors in 1960.*

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