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## NASA Day Special Report: An Interview with Jana Rucker

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**Author Bio:**

Kaylee Rice is a senior History major from Liberty Township, Ohio. During her time at Harding she has been involved in the women's Cross Country and Track teams, as well as being involved in Phi Alpha Theta and HUMANITY. After graduation, she will return to Ohio where she will work as a naturalist-interpreter for Great Parks of Hamilton County. She hopes to eventually attend graduate school in the Cincinnati area.

## NASA DAY SPECIAL REPORT: AN INTERVIEW WITH JANA RUCKER

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**By Kaylee J. Rice**

The idea that would become NASA Day started from humble beginnings. According to Jana Rucker, Harding's Vice President for University Communications and Enrollment, the idea began in the Department of Engineering and Physics. Dr. Charles Wu, a professor from this department, sent a request to NASA. He asked them to send someone to give a presentation for the Department of Engineering and Physics in order to give those students the opportunity to hear from a leading expert in their field.

To everyone's surprise, this request caught the attention of NASA's Chief Technologist, Dr. Douglas Terrier. Dr. Terrier, who is the highest-ranking technology official at NASA, decided to come give the presentation himself. Mrs. Rucker says that Dr. Terrier decided to come because he had never been to Arkansas before and saw this as a good opportunity to visit. All of a sudden, what started as a simple presentation geared toward one department had become a much bigger occasion.

According to Mrs. Rucker, the university felt that the opportunity to host such a high-profile guest was too important not to share. She began to coordinate activities with Betsy Bailey, the Director of Communications for the Searcy School District, and the STEM Coordinators for several different schools in the White County area. Mrs. Rucker also contacted the other schools that are part of the Arkansas Space Grant Consortium. This is a group of seventeen colleges and universities in Arkansas that promote involvement in NASA activities. They also receive NASA grants and help undergraduate and graduate students participate in research activities in the aerospace field. Soon, hundreds of students from kindergarten through college age were scheduled to come to Harding's campus and participate in NASA Day activities.

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Developing activities to appeal to all of these different age groups proved to be a challenge. Hannah Owens, Harding's Director of Digital Media, as well as Dr. Ed Wilson collaborated to create an exhibit to showcase the NASA research that Harding students have worked on ever since the 1960s. Dr. Terrier and Dr. Wilson also dedicated a plaque commemorating Harding's involvement with NASA research. For many, this was the pinnacle of the day. Mrs. Rucker commented that "[Dr. Terrier] is just a gracious person. It was a special moment." In addition to these activities, nearly 1,200 students from schools all over White County came to Harding's campus to attend the lectures, view the exhibit, watch a movie, and sit in on a special presentation about careers at NASA. The Arkansas Space Grant Consortium also held a meeting on campus. In the evening, Dr. Terrier gave a lecture, titled, "Forward to the Moon: The NASA Artemis Program," in which he urged students to reach higher in their goals and aspirations.

It was clear from the beginning of the planning process that NASA Day at Harding was going to be an exciting event that Harding's administration wanted to share with as many other people as possible. This excitement led to yet another idea: what if January 27 could be NASA Day not only for Harding, but for all of Arkansas? This idea was realized when Governor Asa Hutchinson declared January 27, 2020 to be the first ever NASA Day in Arkansas. As it turns out, there is a process set up online to request a proclamation in Arkansas. Having January 27 declared NASA Day took some work: the official request form requires a full explanation of the relevance of the potential proclamation and of its benefits to Arkansas. After some editing designed to make the proclamation more general to Arkansas as a whole, the governor's office declared January 27 to be NASA Day in Arkansas. One of Arkansas' state representatives even read the proclamation to the House of Representatives in Washington D.C., bringing NASA Day to the awareness of not only Harding and Arkansas, but of the entire country.

Ultimately, the purpose of NASA Day was to celebrate the accomplishments of the past and look forward to those that lie ahead.

*NASA Day Special Report: An Interview with Jana Rucker*

Mrs. Rucker sees these goals as compatible with the mission of Harding, saying that “we always want students to see themselves in a greater capacity than they see themselves. . . . That’s what education is all about: it helps people think beyond where they are today.” The far reach of NASA Day demonstrated what Harding students and faculty have always known: that even a small group of people can do anything if they work together. Mrs. Rucker summed it up when she said “we can make anything as big as we want it to be, just by using our resources and working together. That, to me, was the biggest piece of it. It was about NASA day, but it was also about Harding’s capabilities.”



Dr. Douglass Terrier, NASA’s Chief Technologist, observes student projects at Harding University during NASA Day.

*Image Courtesy of Harding University*