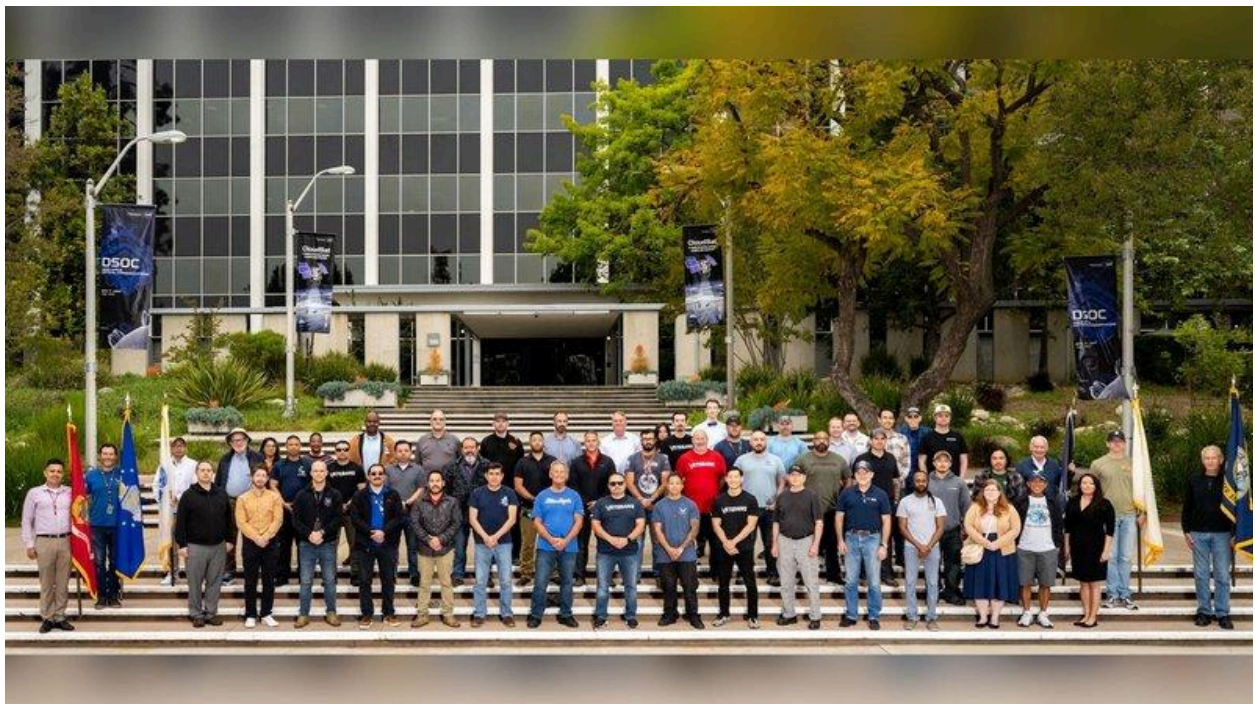


## Featured Stories



*Image Credit: PhotoLab*

## JPL Celebrates Veterans and Unveils Enhanced Military Leave Benefits

By Christian Hill

JPL and Caltech's Military Appreciation Month celebration kicked off May 15 with a rousing rendition of the National Anthem by JPL's own Remi Free in B180-101, where members of the Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, Air Force, and Space Force military service branches gathered to honor and recognize JPL and Caltech veterans.

Deputy Director Leslie Livesay and Human Resources Director Becky Macko joined the event to give opening remarks and share an important update to JPL's benefits options for service members.

Effective immediately, paid leave for military training for JPL and Caltech military members is increasing from 10 to 15 days. Additionally, JPL and Caltech are eliminating the current "pay reconciliation" portion

of the policy, which required military members to offset their military leave payments with any payments received from their training or active duty service.

“The pay reconciliation is no longer in place, we’re no longer going to do that,” Macko told the audience in B180 and those listening online. “The pay you receive while you’re out on service for the country, you keep, and whatever benefit you get from JPL, you retain as well.”

The policy change was championed by Director for the Office of Safety and Mission Success Martin Herman, who worked with the Lab’s employee resource group JPL Vets, and HR, who partnered with the Contracts Management Office and Caltech to bring the updated benefits to fruition.

While the policy is now in place, HR is planning to post additional information in a JPL Space announcement in the near future, and will host an information session with JPL Vets to answer questions.

“On behalf of the JPL Vets board, this policy change is years in the making,” said JPL Vets Chair Christine Hillsgrove, who served as a musician in the Army National Guard for 22 years. “As someone who served while working at JPL, it was challenging getting across the country to serve, and it really was a tough choice. ‘Do I continue to serve, or do I continue to work at JPL?’ This policy change really helps people to be able to continue to serve their nation and continue to do the great work they do here.”

Thomas Rulo, enterprise cybersecurity engineer in the Office of the Chief Information Security Officer, said the policy change shows the Lab’s tangible support for the veteran community at JPL.

“Having those extra five days and removing the pay reconciliation policy will allow people flexibility for additional training and military support that weren’t possible without taking paid time off or leave without pay. Having both streams of JPL and military pay are significant financial benefits, especially for junior service members, and not often matched by other organizations. That is a huge benefit for the service member and the military.”

Rulo served 11 years in the active-duty Army before transitioning to the Army Reserve in 1998. He is currently the Command Sergeant Major for the 319th Expeditionary Signal Battalion based in Sacramento, and continues to participate in weekend training and an annual two-week-long active training period. He came to JPL in 2021 after working the past 15 years as a Department of Defense contractor.

“Honestly, I was a little apprehensive about joining the JPL team because I wasn’t sure about how my military affiliation would fit into the JPL culture,” Rulo said. “But this is really a huge step forward. It lets the veteran community know, in real tangible terms, that we’re supported and valued at JPL and Caltech.”

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*Left: The founding members of AAC in 1994, with Nancy Chiang on the bottom row, second from the left. Right: Current AAC chair Shayena Khandker (second from left) with former Deputy Director Larry James and Director Laurie Leshin.*

## AAC Chairs Connect 30 Years Apart

By Christian Hill

All this time, the origin story of JPL’s Asian American Council had been right under Shayena Khandker’s nose.

Around the start of her second year at JPL in 2022, Electrical Parts Engineer Khandker — now the AAC’s chair — saw ads on the digital posters around Lab noting that a Bengali singer was coming to perform in celebration of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

“I grew up taking Bengali singing lessons as a kid, so it caught my attention,” Khandker said.

It was at this event that Khandker learned about JPL’s Asian American Council — an employee resource group that focuses on celebrating Asian American employees’ cultural heritage, fosters members’ personal and leadership development, and advocates for multicultural inclusion within the JPL and Caltech community.

Khandker was eager to learn more. Following the performance, she emailed the board members to find out about upcoming events and ask about joining the AAC.

Less than a year later, the group’s then-chairperson, Umaa Rebbapragada, encouraged Khandker to take her place. Khandker was surprised but agreeable. It was a chance to grow in a leadership role and develop new connections and friendships across Lab.

It quickly became a history lesson as well.

When Khandker informed her manager, she got another surprise. Nancy Chiang, supervisor of Division 51’s Parts Acquisition Group, had been a founder of AAC.

“I had no idea my manager was the founder of this group,” Khandker said. “I didn’t find out about it until I told her. It was a fun coincidence to discover, and to learn about all of the work that has been done over the decades.”

“When I heard about Shayena becoming chair, I was excited to see it because we are seeing more and more of the younger generation step up in the group,” Chiang said.

### From Dozens to Hundreds

In 1994, Chiang helped found the AAC, born out of a small Human Resources-led mentoring class with 26 attendees of various Asian American backgrounds. Thirty years later, the group boasts 710 members on its mailing list and hosts multiple Lab-wide events including the annual Lunar New Year luncheon celebration, guest speaker lectures, and a variety of cultural classes that have ranged from origami workshops to Chinese (Mandarin) lessons.

Chiang remembers the early days of the group – working alongside colleagues including Navigation Engineer Eunice Lau – where JPLers of Asian American descent could meet colleagues across the Lab, and learn about each other’s diverse backgrounds within the various cultures and ethnicities.

“We wanted to create a space where people felt comfortable to share and bring out into the open where our fellow JPLers come from,” Chiang said. “If we’re willing to open up about ourselves, we can learn about each other, and be more respectful of each person’s experience.”



George Takei at AAC event at JPL in 1995: (left to right) Tiffany Chiu Daleo, Edward Lin, Eunice Lau, Neil Nakamoto, Kitty Twu, Nancy Chiang, George Takei, Patrick Wu, Chester Hashizume, Huyen Duong, Elizabeth Kay-Im, Darrell Jan **Image Credit: Courtesy AAC**

Historically, the group has advocated for career-building opportunities within JPL for the Asian American community, leading career advancement and network events, and using the AAC governance structure as a chance for employees to gain experience in leadership roles.

But, Lau said, “There’s the cultural aspect to it as well. Some Asian cultures are accustomed to being introverted, or naturally quiet, and employees who end up joining and getting involved in the AAC can use the opportunity to be a leader.”

Chiang says Khandker is the perfect example of how the AAC can bring out leaders in the community.

“I actually hired Shayena, and I remember when I interviewed her, she was very shy,” Chiang said. “A year later, when she told me she was running [for AAC chair], I was like, ‘Wow, she’s really worked to step up and be an outspoken leader for this group.’”

For her part as the AAC chair, Khandker has looked to the past to bring the accomplishments of the group and JPL’s Asian American community to the forefront.

“This AAC actually had a comprehensive newsletter in the ‘90s, and we’re working to archive and document those old copies. We have actually started – or restarted, I should say – the AAC Journal this past year,” Khandker said.



The first AAC newsletter started by Nancy Chiang and the AAC in June 1994, and the revamped newsletter restarted by Shayena Khandker and AAC members in June 2023.

Khandker also points out the AAC’s role in the recent update to JPL’s Founders Plaque – a 1968 bronze memorial installed on JPL’s Mall that included the names of some founders of JPL but left others, notably Chinese aerospace engineer Qian Xuesen. Last year, an overlay was placed atop the plaque that clarifies and corrects the omission of Xuesen from the original.

Looking to the future, Khandker hopes the AAC continues to be a place that embraces individual cultures.

“We may represent a large group, but there are very unique issues that we each face,” Khandker said. “I’m a Muslim employee at JPL and given current events, it can be mentally taxing and challenging to go to

work when you have family and friends who can be affected overseas. But that's just one unique perspective within the Asian American bubble. There might be employees who are third-generation Japanese American whose grandparents were in internment camps, or they could be first-generation refugees who have the challenges associated with that.

“What we want to do is make space for, and create, a welcoming environment for all of these identities around Asia that make us realize we all have a lot more in common than we realize, and a lot more to learn as well.”

Future goals for the AAC include reviewing opportunities to recognize religious minority holidays including Diwali, Nowruz, and Eid, and to highlight more cultural recognition opportunities such as the recent acknowledgement of Arab American Heritage month this past April.

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## Events



### Von Karman Lecture Series: How Space-Based Technology Improves Our Daily Lives

Thursday, June 20  
5 to 6 p.m.

[Watch live on YouTube](#)

**Talk title:** Von Karman Lecture Series – NASA in Your Home: How Space-Based Technology Improves Our Daily Lives

**The main idea:** Manager Daniel Broderick and Research Technologist Andrew Thorpe will explore how space-based technology becomes a spinoff, including a deep dive on Carbon Mapper, a NASA-built instrument that will pinpoint and measure methane and carbon dioxide sources in communities around the world from low-Earth orbit.

**Background:** Did you know that the microchip in your cell phone’s camera was first developed at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory for use on spacecraft?

- The cell phone camera is one of many “spinoffs,” or commercialized products that incorporate NASA technology or expertise that benefit the general public.
- Spinoffs have been part of our lives for decades: improved GPS, assistive eyesight technology, advanced dental imaging, and even sophisticated videogame landscapes were all originally developed at JPL to study Earth and the universe.

**Speakers:**

- Daniel Broderick, manager of the Office of Technology Transfer
- Andrew Thorpe, research technologist

**Host:** Gregory Smith, Communications and Education Directorate

**Co-host:** Rachel Zimmerman Brachman, public outreach specialist

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## JPL Family News

### Retirees

The following JPL employees recently announced their retirements:

#### **40+ Years:**

Bobbie W. Woo, Org 48 years

Randall H. Foehner, Org 3550, 42 years

Cecilia N. Guiar, Org 3000, 41 years

#### **30+ Years:**

Yuki Salinas, Org 3520, 37 years

Jeffrey A. Mellstrom, Org 7000, 36 years

#### **20+ Years:**

Mary Freeman, Org 3314, 29 years

Tyrone C. Little, Org 2133, 25 years