



Making unique masks for Curiosity's ChemCam team

July 30, 2020

Cindy Little began sewing COVID-19 masks for the 12-member ChemCam Engineering Operations team

Cindy Little is an engineer who has been operating the Chemistry and Camera (ChemCam) instrument on NASA's Curiosity rover's mast since August 2011. Thanks to this little shooter, we know the surface of Mars was once home to shallow, salty ponds that went through episodes of overflow and drying. These findings stem from an analysis of rocks enriched in mineral salts in Gale Crater, a 100-mile-wide dry lakebed, performed with the ChemCam instrument, which sits atop the rover and shoots Martian rocks with a laser to determine their chemical make-up.

In early April this year, Cindy began sewing COVID-19 masks for the 12-member ChemCam Engineering Operations team, which continues to field signs that Mars was once habitable to microbial life.

The face of ChemCam, photographed by another camera on the rover, is featured on the masks. "I just thought I must do ChemCam because it's cool, and I wanted to get them for everyone," Cindy said.

For those who may be wondering, the 2020 Perseverance rover is expected to launch on its Mars mission at the end of July, while Curiosity continues its road trip across Mars.

No two exactly alike

On Twitter, Cindy's teammates raved about their personalized yet team-themed masks.

"You guys, look at this amazing mask!! Fellow ChemCam engineer Cindy made it for me and I love it so much," tweeted Nina Lanza, whose Twitter handle is @marsninja, followed by "I shoot the lasers, pew, pew."

Cindy used a fabric pen to personalize the masks with team members' nicknames, including "marsninja" and "I shoot the lasers, pew, pew."

"These custom ChemCam masks are a perfect example of Cindy's thoughtfulness and generosity," Nina said. "Cindy has a long history of supporting the team, both with her extensive knowledge of the ChemCam instrument and with a range of delicious baked goods that she frequently brings to the operations center."

Roberta Beal, also of the Lab's ChemCam Engineering Operations team, tweeted, "Cindy Little, most awesome of ChemCam friends, made this mask with my ChemCam nickname, Robotra, on it."

Left: Roberta Beal, a member of the ChemCam Engineering Operations team, with a laboratory clone of the ChemCam instrument. Right: Roberta Beal sports her pandemic mask, personalized with her ChemCam nickname, Robotra.

Cindy has another fabric pattern that she also likes with smaller, three-inch ChemCams.

Dozens and dozens

Cindy makes masks of many designs, for friends and strangers alike. She gives them all away.

She's made close to 400 masks so far, but she still thinks of them one mask at a time.

"I had a lady ask me to make 100," Cindy said. "I can't say that I'm not going to make that many, but I get overwhelmed if I think about big requests. I block out ideas of huge numbers and just plug along."

Her view on life amid COVID-19 is equally philosophical.

"If we look at it as 'I can't do this for two years,' we will go crazy," Cindy said. "But if we look at it as I can live this way tomorrow, and I think I can do it next week, then we can do it."

Making masks helps her move past feelings of helplessness as COVID-19 rages on, Cindy said.

"If it helps one person, then I'm doing my little piece to help people. Also, when I can deliver them, I see everyone's faces."

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