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Phoenix Lights Remain Bright One Year Later

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Phoenix Lights remain bright one year later

Alien or not, they lit up some lives

Michael Chow/The Arizona Republic

Since witnessing the Phoenix Lights a year ago, Mike and Nannette Fortson spend their nights together watching the skies, hoping for another sighting.

By Richard Ruelas
The Arizona Republic
March 13, 1998

No one was abducted by the crafts that flew over Phoenix on March 13, 1997. The air ships didn't land in the Valley, blaze a pattern in the desert grass, or even scrape a tree. The balls of lights that same night didn't send out musical tones trying to communicate.

That could be, of course, because the crafts were most likely a squadron of planes. And the balls of light were high-intensity flares dropped during a training exercise.

But the "Phoenix Lights," which appeared a year ago today, had definite impact, whether their origin was ordinary or out-of-this world.

Documentaries have been done, more are on the way; books and a CD-ROM are in the works. The lights are on T-shirts and talk radio.

They've pushed a relatively unknown former Phoenix city councilwoman into the national media spotlight. Two men who investigated the lights say it cost them a business relationship with a Spam millionaire. Another UFO investigator said the lights zapped him of energy to peer anymore.

The lights also rekindled at least one marriage.

Nannette and Mike Fortson happened to see the light formation from

their Chandler back yard. Since then, they've spent every night outside looking for a repeat show.

"Other than the hand of God coming through space, nothing could have been more profound," said Mike Fortson, a safety products salesman and chili cook-off champion.

The Fortsons, both 45, now spend about three hours each night sitting outside on their patio scanning the skies. They tore out a gazebo so they have a clearer view. They have a \$900 video camera at the ready, and a high-beam flashlight in case any crafts want to communicate.

They've seen some objects they believe are alien craft, but nothing as spectacular as the March 13 lights. The main benefit has been to their 25-year marriage, they say.

"To be able to shut the TV off and talk, that's a great thing," Fortson said. "I think it's brought back some passion to us," he said before his wife shushed him.

It was a spectacular light show, no doubt, seen by thousands of Phoenix residents.

Around 8:30 p.m. five lights swept down from Northern Arizona over Phoenix in a boomerang formation. Some say it appeared to be a solid black object; others said they could see stars between the lights. A videotape shows that the lights seemed to move independently of each other.

An amateur astronomer pointed his powerful telescope at the lights and said he saw airplanes.

The second light show happened closer to 10 p.m. Seven lights flashed brilliantly, then slowly disappeared along the city's southwestern horizon.

An Air National Guard sergeant found that the Maryland Air Guard had dropped a volley of flares during training exercises southwest of Phoenix around 10 p.m.

But those explanations didn't satisfy some.

A hard-core group turned the tables, deciding they didn't need to prove the lights were an alien craft, but rather demanded skeptics prove they weren't.

For the believers, a clubhouse emerged: Village Labs, a spacious, mostly vacant office in Tempe.

The company was set up five years ago, with designs on enabling companies to access a planned supercomputer in Nebraska.

The company was run by Jim Dilettoso and Michael Tanner, who spent the '70s as touring rock musicians and part-time UFO researchers. They convinced Spam magnate Geordie Hormel to pay their lease and lend the company its considerable start-up costs, court records show.

But instead of finding investors, Dilettoso and Tanner said they spent the bulk of their time investigating the lights.

Dilettoso said he was courting companies like TRW and US West, but they backed off.

"When you're dealing with companies that big, you can't say, 'Sorry, I missed the paperwork deadline because I was working on some UFO video last night,' " he said.

Hormel recently yanked his funds from Village Labs, saying he couldn't wait any longer for the computer project which was supposed to return him millions of dollars. Village Labs got an eviction notice and must be out in less than three weeks.

"It was all legit, there was nothing fake about it," said Hormel, who estimated he put \$2 million into Village Labs. "It just never got the financing it needed."

Tanner said he spent countless hours interviewing more than 300 witnesses to the lights, dismissing only three of them as kooks. Witness statements have put more objects in the sky that night.

Tanner has concluded there were at least two V-shaped craft, two solid

triangles, one giant disc and two hovering formations of orbs competing for airspace that night.

Dilettoso became the media's expert on the lights. He began doing optical analysis of the videotapes, saying he could prove by careful spectral analysis of the amateur videotapes, that the objects weren't flares.

But Paul Scowen, an astronomer at Arizona State University, isn't so sure. He said it's impossible to tell anything about the origin of a light source from a TV picture.

"The evidence seems a little bit shaky," Scowen said.

Richard Motzer, who heads up Arizona's Mutual UFO Network group, said he's done chasing aliens.

"I can't afford it. I don't want another one of these things," he said. Motzer said his self-started computing business suffered because of the time he spent digging for the truth.

"You have to draw an ending point to this," he said.

The lights could signal a new beginning for another media darling created during the year: Francis Emma Barwood.

The former Phoenix councilwoman was rebuked by everyone she asked to look into the lights. She used the refusals as ammunition for her secretary of state campaign, pledging to open up state records. One of her campaign consultants is a national UFO expert.

"After talking to hundreds of people, it's just amazing how deeply they feel about this, that something's there," she said.

Barwood said she doesn't aim to be known as the UFO candidate, but said it follows her everywhere.

Except the one day she spoke to some UFO buffs at a metaphysical bookstore in Phoenix.

"They didn't even ask me about UFO stuff," Barwood said. "They wanted to learn where I stood on all the (political) issues."

That could be because the lights, for some, are simply a hobby.

"I definitely look up a lot more," said Trig Johnston, a former airline pilot who saw the 8:30 p.m. lights. "I haven't been obsessed with it. I think some people have."

Despite his time investment, Fortson said the lights are merely a fascination for him as well.

"I don't go everywhere with my camera; I don't have an aluminum foil hat," Fortson said.

But he does have a patio, a pair of binoculars and a low-light video camera.

"If March 13 happens again," he said. "I'll be ready for it."

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