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Mars Lander's safe arrival elates UA scientist Boynton

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At 4:52 p.m. Sunday, William Boynton stood dead still, staring at a NASA television feed in the University of Arizona's Kuiper Space Sciences Building.

Along with every other scientist involved with the UA-led NASA Phoenix Mars Lander mission, Boynton was holding his breath, waiting for confirmation the Lander had touched down safely in the red planet's polar region.

The UA geochemistry professor is the veteran of three exploratory Mars missions, only one of which was successful. He has had his fingers crossed all year that the Phoenix would be another mark in his "win" column. He got his wish Sunday.

"You'll have to excuse me," he told the cheering crowd at 4:53 p.m., "but I have an appointment with a bottle of champagne."

More than 200 people squeezed into the Kuiper lecture hall to pepper Boynton with questions and listen as he translated the NASA-speak coming over the feed from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif.

As soon as it was evident the Phoenix had sent a signal via an orbiter to JPL indicating a good landing, scientists on the television screen went wild and their enthusiasm was matched by the Kuiper crowd.

Everyone in the room seemed to know what this event meant to UA, but only a handful really understood what it meant to Boynton, who is scientific lead on the Thermal and Evolved-Gas Analyzer, or TEGA.

Boynton had a TEGA on the Mars Polar Lander in 1999, which crash-landed. At that time, according to Tucson Citizen archives, the then-54-year-old said, "There will be other opportunities."

Sunday, walking around the UA Science Operations Center before speaking at Kuiper, Boynton allowed that the next opportunity was now and refused to think of failure.

"I'm nervous, but I'm confident because I know the engineers with the landing gear are the best in the world," he said. "Even if it fails, we've succeeded because we've already got a lot out of this with the technology we've developed and the students we've educated."

Boynton's instrument will use eight miniature ovens to heat Martian soil and ice samples to determine the chemical characteristics of the material, which Boynton said could help determine if life was ever supported on Mars.

"I've always liked to do puzzles and this is like solving a really big puzzle, except there is no page you can

turn to to get the answers," he said. "This is the best I've felt in a long time."

Caption: UA scientist William Boynton and Suzanne Young, a chemistry professor from Tufts University who works on Boynton's TEGA team, celebrate with champagne outside UA's Kuiper Space Sciences Building after watching the Phoenix Mars Lander touch down on the red planet successfully.

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