

Space scientist James Van Allen (1914–2006)

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20060810-32

August 10, 2006



Raymond Chen

Discoverer of the Van Allen radiation belts and one of the TIME magazine men of the year for 1960 [James Van Allen died yesterday](#). (What a coincidence. What are the odds that the person to discover the Van Allen radiation belts would *also* be named Van Allen?) I never met the man, but I met his granddaughter. She has an amazing facility with languages and became fluent in Japanese after spending a year as an exchange student. Her Japanese was so good that at one point, a girl came up to her and asked, “How do you get your skin so pale?”, mistaking her for a native who had undergone some sort of bleaching process to get milky white skin. That’s when you know you’ve made it. When native speakers mistake you for one of their own who merely has had a lot of cosmetic surgery.

(Whenever we tell this story, she tries to downplay the experience. “Yeah, well, the girl didn’t have her glasses on.” Like that changes the story in any significant way. Now, if the girl were deaf...)

[Raymond Chen](#)

Follow

