

SETI Institute Names Lori Marino as 2026 Drake Award Recipient

Honoring pioneering research on the evolution of intelligence on Earth and beyond

April 1, 2026, Mountain View, CA -- The SETI Institute announced today that Dr. Lori Marino will receive the 2026 Drake Award, continuing its tradition of celebrating contributions to the search for life and intelligence beyond Earth. Marino is recognized for advancing our understanding of intelligence—on Earth and beyond—and for applying that knowledge to foster meaningful scientific, ethical, and social change.

“Dr. Marino’s work is a true inspiration, not just because her research on intelligence has profound implications for our search for life beyond Earth, but because she is an example of how science can guide us towards deeper, more responsible relationships with all forms of life on Earth,” said Lucian Walkowicz, Chair of the SETI Institute’s Science Advisory Board.

Named after Dr. Frank Drake—the architect of the Drake Equation and the inaugural president of the SETI Institute’s Board of Directors—the Drake Award honors remarkable achievements in SETI and astrobiology. Each year, the SETI Institute’s Science Advisory Board nominates candidates, who are then ratified by its Board of Directors.

“I am so honored to be given an award in Frank Drake’s name,” said Marino. “At my first bioastronomy conference in Santa Cruz in 1993, Frank came right up to me to introduce himself. I will always remember how warm and welcoming he was. And since then, as a teacher, I’ve tried, in turn, to be as kind to my students as he was to me. I am also most encouraged by the SETI Institute’s recognition that there is an inherent link between scientific discovery and the ethics of how we live as just one species of animal among the 8 million others on Earth.”

Since its inception in 2001, the Drake Award has been presented to



Image Credit: Lori Marino.



PRESS RELEASE

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extraordinary individuals. Past recipients include Frank Drake, Charles Townes, William Borucki, Victoria Meadows, Jason Wright, Paul Horowitz, Dan Werthimer, Shelley Wright, John Rummel, Andrew Siemion, David Deamer, and John Baross, demonstrating the diverse achievements recognized by the SETI Institute.

“We are delighted to honor Lori Marino and her extraordinary work providing deeper insights into the nature and diversity of intelligence for this year’s Drake Award,” said SETI Institute President and CEO, Bill Diamond. “In our efforts to find not just life, but intelligent, complex life elsewhere in the Universe, it’s helpful to understand what intelligence is and how it manifests across a vast diversity of species here on Earth. Lori’s contributions to this body of knowledge have been exemplary.”

Lori Marino

As the Founder and President of the Whale Sanctuary Project and Executive Director of The Kimmela Center for Scholarship-based Animal Advocacy, Marino has spent her career deepening our understanding of brain evolution and cognition in dolphins, whales, primates, and other animals. Her professional academic experience—as a former faculty member at Emory University and current adjunct professor at New York University—complements her prolific authorship of more than 150 scientific publications on animal intelligence, brain size and evolution, self-awareness, and the impacts of captivity on wild species.

Building on this foundation, Marino has been engaged with the SETI and astrobiology communities for more than three decades, studying the evolution of intelligence from a cosmic perspective. She applies her work to key questions such as the emergence and evolution of complex intelligence in the Drake Equation. Beyond academia, Marino operates at the intersection of science and animal law, advising major legal efforts on animal protection and helping to landmark policy changes, including Canada’s ban on cetacean captivity. Her work has brought scientific insight on nonhuman intelligence into public and scientific awareness through scholarship, advocacy, and media.

The 2026 Drake Awards will take place on May 14, 2026, at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California. Hosted by the SETI Institute’s Seth Shostak and Molly Bentley, the public event will present the Drake Award, feature the SETI Forward Award, which encourages future scientists, and recognize the Carl Sagan Director’s Award, which celebrates outstanding contributions to astrobiology, technology, and the exploration of life in the universe.

To attend, register at <https://drakeawards2026.eventbrite.com>. Additional event and ticketing information are available through the registration link.

About the SETI Institute

Founded in 1984, the SETI Institute is a non-profit, multi-disciplinary research and education organization whose mission is to lead humanity’s quest to understand the origins and prevalence of life and intelligence in the Universe and to share that knowledge with the world. Our research encompasses the physical and biological sciences and leverages expertise in data analytics, machine learning and advanced signal detection technologies. The SETI Institute is a distinguished research partner for industry, academia and government agencies, including NASA and NSF.