Oceanography Pioneer Marie Tharp Receives First Lamont-Doherty Award

BY DANIELLE BIZZARRO

Just a few weeks short of her 81st birthday, Marie Tharp, the mother of modern ocean floor cartography, was honored by Columbia with the first annual Lamont-Doherty Heritage Award for her life’s work as a pioneer of oceanography.

The award was presented to Tharp at Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades N.Y., the site of Tharp’s work, in July. It was through Tharp’s observa-
tions that the Atlantic Rift Valley was first discovered, which paved the way for acceptance of the theories of plate tectonics and continental drift. Tharp may be best known, however, for creating the first detailed global maps of the ocean floor based on sonar, maps that have since become modern scientific icons.

A pioneering woman in what was then a man’s field, Tharp was able to study geology in the 1940s when the loss of men to combat in World War II led the University of Michigan to open its geology department to female students. “I never would have gotten the chance to study geology if it hadn’t been for Pearl Har-
bor,” she said.

Tharp graduated with honors and earned an advanced math degree while working for Stann-
lind Oil in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Yet Tharp was “hooked on research” and after graduation came east to Columbia, Tharp did not even mention that she had an advanced degree in geology.

Only in the last few years has Tharp begun to be recognized for her work. In 1998 she was honored dur-
ing the 100th anniversary of the Library of Congress’ Geography and Map Division. The following year, she was recognized by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

The significance of Tharp’s achievement and of the maps’ importance cannot be overstated,” says Mike Purdy, director of the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observ-
tory. “Marie Tharp, winner of the Lamont-Doherty Heritage Award, is best known for creating the first detailed global maps of the ocean floor based on sonar.

Above, Marie Tharp, winner of the Lamont-Doherty Heritage Award, is best known for creating the first detailed global maps of the ocean floor based on sonar. Left, Marie Tharp’s “World Ocean Floor Map.”

Summer Construction Brings Improvements to Classrooms and Buildings Across Campus

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(Continued from Page 8)

new projection, a podium with a sink and running water and a retractable beam needed for physics and science experiments. Avery Hall has undergone major infrastructure improvements, including new heating and air conditioning.

Work has also begun on the new academic space under East campus plaza that will house the Institute for Social and Economic Research Policy and the Lan-
guage Resource Center. The summer refresh program brought improvements and repairs to 79 registrar rooms.

In its fourth year, the program, originally designed to keep up with the needs of high-traffic classrooms and maintain improvements, is building on years of improvements, includ-
ing new flooring, lighting, chalkboards, furniture acoustics and air conditioning.

Pupin 101, a 280-seat amphitheater originally designed in the 1920s, had air conditioning and new seat-
ing and lighting installed this summer. Furnald Lawn, above right, welcomed students with a new look. Both sites were among the summer’s largest renovation and construction program to date.