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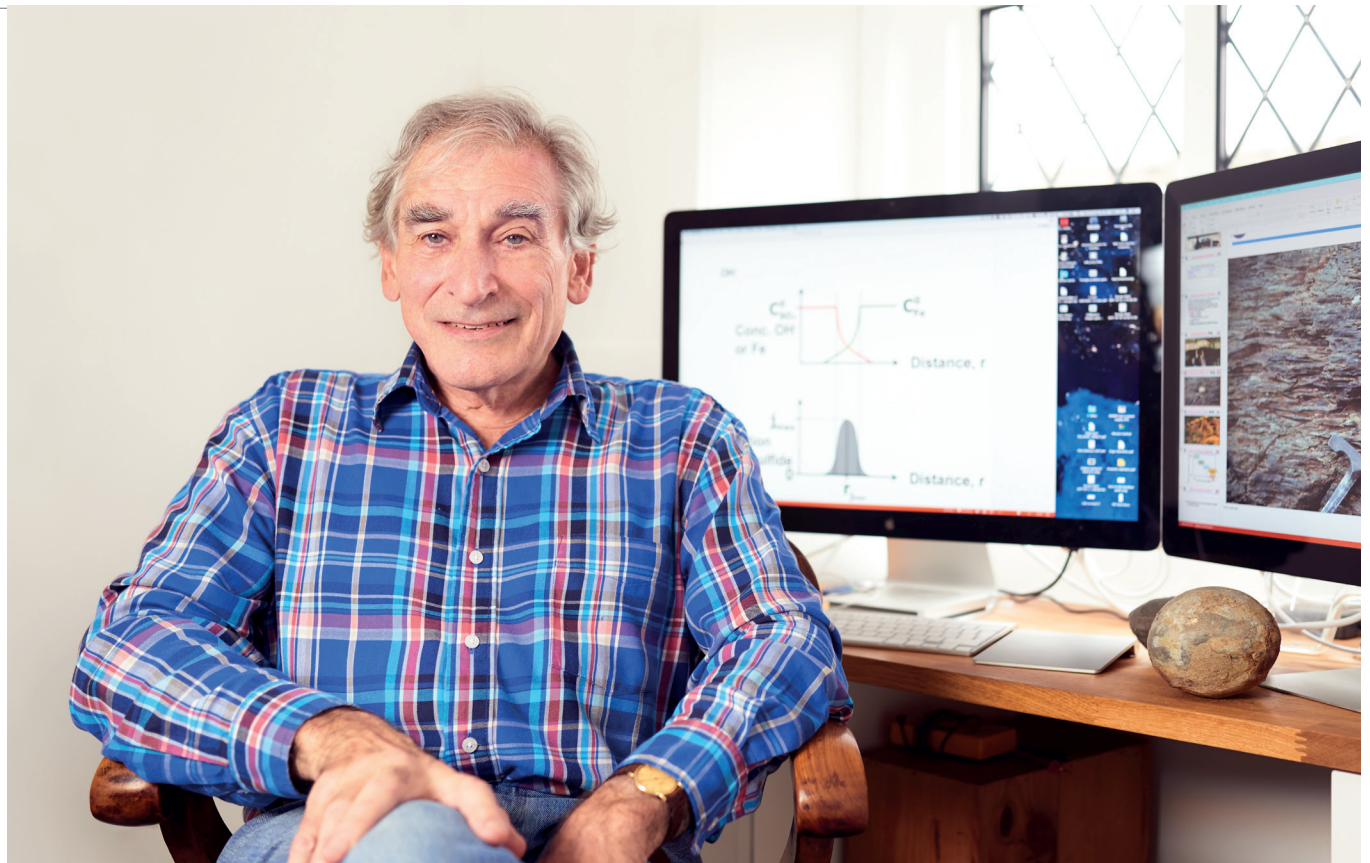
THE NEXT ACT | LIFE STORIES

THE ASTROBIOLOGIST / SCIENTIFIC RESEARCHER

Professor Max Coleman, 75

Star man

AT 75, HIS CURIOSITY AND ENTHUSIASM UNDIMMED, THIS NASA RESEARCH SCIENTIST HAS NO PLANS TO SCALE DOWN HIS SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE. AS FAR AS HE'S CONCERNED, HE'S JUST GETTING STARTED.



I'd spent my career working as a geochemist, in government science, industry and academia when, aged 61, I was offered a full-time position at NASA Jet Propulsion Lab, Caltech in California as Director of the Centre for Life Detection. Part of the role involved developing new signatures of life – certain molecules that could only have been created by life forms – and

in the Caribbean investigating what lives around the deepest known hydrothermal vents in the world, nearly 5,000 metres underwater, and looked at bugs that thrive in highly acidic rivers in southern Spain. I also work on projects to develop analytical instruments for future space missions, and travel to places as diverse as Canberra and Cairo presenting my

about winding down their work. I just saw it as a fantastic opportunity to do some really interesting science. And I think that seeing the positive aspects of many things – and not having tunnel vision about scientific disciplines, but instead seeing opportunities to collaborate – is a large part of why at 75, my career is still evolving, and why I'm still working and still finding what I do new, interesting and exciting.

if we did that?" – has led to some amazing discoveries.

When it comes to my lifestyle, I've always stayed physically fit. And I absolutely believe that being active helps you maintain mental acuity. I used to play squash, then in my 40s I took up running daily – two or three miles on weekdays, up to 12 at the weekends, and now I train on an elliptical trainer and go for long hikes. I only stopped running at the age of 71 because my back couldn't take it.

I remember a few years ago when I was still running but finding it harder and my daughter suggested that I could just run slower. It hadn't even occurred to me. In the same way, I'm still working because it's never occurred to me to retire. I like what I do. It's an amazing privilege – and a bit of luck – to be paid to do your hobby, so I'll only retire when the research grants run out.

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looking at how this knowledge might apply to other parts of the solar system, most recently Mars and Europa. I'm not looking for little green men, but I am looking for signs that little green microbes might once have been there.

Part of my work with NASA involves looking at environments on earth where life might have originated – or survives in really adverse conditions – so I've gone on research cruises

ideas and meeting thought-provoking and inspiring people. Sometimes it's hard to think of something I enjoy so much as "a job."

I'd never even thought about working for a space agency (even though as a child I was really interested in astronomy) but I wasn't surprised that I was being offered what many might think of as a plum job at a point when a lot of people might be thinking

I'm still driven by the curiosity that I've had ever since I was a kid and took clocks apart to see how they worked. What motivates me is working out what makes nature tick. And I don't know if that thirst for knowledge is genetic – my father left school at 14 but was always looking to further his knowledge and in his 80s gave lectures at the University of the Third Age on current affairs and opera – or because my parents allowed me to carry on asking questions when I was very young.

But I haven't stopped asking those questions. I think asking naive questions about other people's work – taking a position that says "Why can't we do this?" or "What would happen

This is the latest in a series of profiles of individuals who are redefining later life that will appear in FT Weekend Magazine and at www.nextact.ft.com.

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