

President's Column – Debra Meloy Elmegreen – July-August 2010

Moon over Miami, palm trees, and a riverwalk set the perfect scene for our 216th meeting, a typically intimate summer gathering with about 800 attendees. Kudos and thanks to Kevin and his Marvel-ous staff for another smooth and well-executed gathering. It was all the more special because of meeting jointly with the Solar Physics Division, which happens every 3 years. It's nice when the smaller divisions are able to overlap with the general meeting, to foster more interactions among astronomers who work in a variety of fields. Dramatic results from new missions such as Herschel, Hinode and SDO, WISE, CoRoT, Cassini-Huygens observations of Titan, CMB observations from the South Pole, progress on ALMA, and solar tales from SPD Hale prizewinner Marcia Neugebauer and Harvey prizewinner Brian Welsch were among the many exciting presentations.

Three newly funded opportunities were announced: the Doxsey Award for thesis-presenting graduate students to travel to the AAS, the Lancelot Berkeley Prize for meritorious recently published research to be presented at the AAS, and the Kavli Award to a distinguished plenary AAS speaker, as discussed elsewhere in this Newsletter.

I was thinking about what makes AAS meetings special. We gather for the science, of course; the general meetings provide opportunities to get a firsthand update on key advances, which help inform not only our research but also our teaching. The short talks give us highlights, while plenary talks give us an overview of a field. It's a great opportunity for undergraduates and graduate students just entering the field to get a taste of the diversity of research going on, in a way that specialized meetings cannot. But AAS meetings offer many opportunities beyond the exchange of research results. In Miami, there was a panel meeting on International Partnerships in Astronomy. The Committee on the Status of Women hosted sessions on mentoring, on the future of astronomy careers, and on gender bias. As always, there were Town Halls to hear about the latest news from our funding agencies and science centers, from NSF to NASA to NOAO and NRAO, and how they are looking forward to the upcoming Decadal report. There were also the usual teaching workshops for introductory astronomy. Informal networking is a major benefit to attendees. And where else can you shake a leg at Gina Brissenden's and Jake Noel-Storr's legendary parties, like the one we just enjoyed!

The summer meeting is also about transition. I am honored and excited to take over at the helm, and appreciate your confidence in electing me. I thank our outgoing president John Huchra for his outstanding leadership over the past two years. As president, John spearheaded the AAS Ethics Policy, as well as the development of a Strategic Plan to help us achieve the goals accompanying our Mission Statement. I'm especially grateful to John for his guidance over the past year, and look forward to his advice as past president. Special thanks too to retiring AAS secretary John Graham for his extensive service to the Society, as we welcome Fritz Benedict into the fold. Also thanks to our outgoing Councilors Chryssa Kouveliotou, Jay Lockman,

and Nick Suntzeff (now incoming VP) and outgoing VP Lee Hartmann; it was a pleasure to serve with them.

We have an energetic incoming Council, and lots of ideas for executing the goals of the AAS. The Strategic Plan draft will be posted on the website, and I urge everyone to read it and provide comments. All members should be familiar with our policies and statements, and check in regularly as we begin to explore new projects; the AAS only works if the plans suit the members. There are several issues of ongoing concern to the Society. Coming down the pike are revisions to the Shapley Lectureship program. We want to restructure it in a way that will be more proactive; for example, to help target minority institutions and institutions (such as community colleges) that might not know to request a lecturer. We will continue to strive for a more diverse and representative membership, and a new working group on demographics will develop an ongoing database. I look forward to working with the AAS members to make sure the Society is what you want it to be. Please feel free to send me your thoughts about what we as a society might do help improve our profession. We will also consider ways to facilitate easier 2-way communications between members and the Council.

Astronomers of my generation automatically joined the AAS as a sort of entry into the profession. In Miami, Terry Oswalt gave an inspiring talk about recognizing the diversity of astronomy-related jobs and reaching out to astronomers beyond research universities to become part of the AAS. I encourage current members to make an effort to get their non-AAS colleagues and students to join as well. Besides semiannual meetings, the AAS manages some of the most important publications in astronomy, and provides advocacy for astronomical issues of concern to all of us. But if the meetings and journals and advocacy are not sufficient reasons to join, I am particularly interested in hearing about what the AAS means to you, and what other benefits to membership that we might explore.

Looking ahead, clearly a major upcoming event for astronomers is the roll-out of the Astro2010 Decadal report. It has been sent off to reviewers, and will be presented in pre-release to the agencies in August, and to the public two weeks afterwards. Thanks to the Decadal process, the astronomical community enjoys a reputation among government officials as being well-organized and united. It is imperative that we all support the recommendations, so that Congress will take us seriously in providing the funding we need to implement the priorities. Council is considering ways to discuss the Decadal recommendations so that everyone can hear the rationale for the difficult decisions that were made by the Survey Committee. Town Halls were very successful in engaging a broad cross-section of the community in discussions and in stimulating White Paper inputs to the Decadal Survey, so we would like to use that format for the roll-out as well. We envision that local institutions could host regional Town Halls, with an AAS councilor to lead the gathering and a Decadal Survey committee member to present the results and stimulate discussion. Please consider hosting such a Town Hall, and contact me or a

member of Council if you are interested; we will provide more details later as the plans evolve. Stay tuned for a busy fall.