

President's Column – Debra Meloy Elmegreen – March-April 2012

Deep in the heart Texas, the stars (and moon and Jupiter) were indeed bright as we enjoyed our 219th meeting in Austin. The “superbowl of astronomy” this year had over 2900 registrants, including over 600 junior members. The meeting was a memorable one, with terrific speakers and great sessions and workshops. Heineman prizewinner Bob Kirshner, Kavli lecturer Lyman Page, and Cannon prizewinner Rachel Mandelbaum gave lively and exciting talks on their cosmology work. Pierce prizewinner Gaspar Bakos impressed the audience with his live telescope operation while describing exoplanet discoveries, and Berkeley prizewinner Linda Tacconi closed out the meeting with beautiful gas measurements in redshift 2 galaxies. There were poignant NASA manned space mission reflections by Steve Hawley, among many other wonderful plenary talks. There were fun evening events too, both official and unofficial, with “Saving Hubble” and “The City Dark” and “Armageddon” movie showings, and a very lively Wednesday night dance party featuring Brown Dwarfs as the signature cocktail. Many thanks to Kevin Marvel and the AAS staff for their meeting planning efforts, and Lee Anne Willson and the science planning team for lining up such a great program.

We were pleased to have as our first meeting “media interns” several members of the Astrobites community who shadowed Press Officer Rick Fienberg and posted entertaining blogs about the meeting. This opportunity provided them an inside glimpse of a career in science media, which was also the topic of a panel discussion. Other career-building sessions and workshops included discussions about careers in science policy, effective mentoring, teaching diverse audiences, structuring scientific papers, building resumes, citizen science, and astronomers teaching climate change. Providing these kinds of training and awareness of opportunities to our members is part of our core strategic effort, and I thank the many committees and dedicated individuals who organized these and other informative events at the meeting.

We were excited to announce in Austin a brand new Division of the American Astronomical Society, the Laboratory Astrophysics Division, which will be officially recognized at the Anchorage meeting. This is the first new Division in over 30 years; Divisions were first started in the 1970's for particular subgroups who felt that a focused effort was needed to help their field. Laboratory Astrophysics started as a Working Group five years ago, and their efforts culminated in approval of the new Division and By-Laws during the weekend Council meeting prior to the general meeting.

The charter and charge of the new Working Group on LGBTIQ, officially known as WGLE, was approved in Austin. Several WGLE members appeared onstage at the meeting's prize presentation ceremony, during which Charles Francis of the Frank Kameny Papers project accepted a certificate of appreciation to Dr. Kameny in

honor of his efforts on behalf of the homosexual community. It was a moving event that led to a standing ovation from much of the audience.

It was a pleasure to award AAS prizes to Dave Leckrone, Grace Deming, Edward Cheng, and Hale Bradt, and to officially announce AAS honorary membership to Yasuo Tanaka. This was the first daytime prize ceremony, which was a nice way to recognize our awardees in front of a broad audience. You'll recall that the prize ceremony used to occur during the closing banquet, which has morphed into a free closing reception for all (with fine barbecue in Austin!). We first tried out a closing reception in Boston after getting negative feedback about closing banquets, so we do pay attention to our members' input and keep trying to improve the meeting experience. The closing reception in Anchorage promises to have a fun twist to it, so plan to come and check it out.

Many members don't realize that the AAS has year-round business, including work that transcends the winter and summer meetings. Executive Officer Kevin Marvel and his amazing staff of 18 people are distributed across Membership, Meetings, Communications, Journals, Finance, Information Technology, Press and Education, Public Policy. There's also the Secretary's office, in addition to the editorial boards and staff for *Astrophysical Journal*, *Letters*, and *Supplements*, *Astronomical Journal*, and *Astronomy Education Research*. The AAS staff works to help Council achieve its strategic goals and implement short-term and long-term initiatives. Council holds a full day of strategic planning at a retreat on the Saturday before AAS meetings, and a full day of business on the Sunday before the meetings, in addition to an autumn Executive Committee meeting which overlaps with the Division Chairs (which I described in the Nov-Dec newsletter). These planning sessions can lead to initiatives that may be AAS-wide or that feed back into the work of our numerous committees (6 presidential appointment committees, the most recent being the Sustainability Committee and the Demographics Committee, including a longitudinal study; 9 standing committees; 2 boards, the Astronomy Education Board and the Publications Board, whose elected chairs also serve as members of Council; 4 working groups, the most recent being WGLE; plus 14 prize committees). To learn more about each of these, check out their webpages on <http://aas.org/comms>.

In Austin, we devoted our strategic Council meeting to ideas centered on some core goals of the AAS: improving diversity, addressing education, considering employment and postdocs, and discussing astropolitics. We reviewed metrics that we are beginning to accumulate in order to assess the effectiveness of our various activities. We had a guest speaker, Associate Dean Sarah Simmons from UT Austin, who described the university's Freshman Research Initiative as a broad program to engage students in scientific research as part of the curriculum as soon as they enter college. Her statistics on the retention of students in science, and the improved diversity in their science programs, bode well for other similar programs by AAS members. She has a brief write-up of the effort elsewhere in this newsletter. Sharing results of such initiatives helps provide those of us in departments with some ways to improve our effectiveness in training and educating students.

The political aspects of astronomy of course involve year-round efforts by Kevin Marvel and Bahcall Fellow Bethany Johns, along with our Committee on Astronomy and Public Policy chaired by Jack Burns, and Council and the Executive Committee. Bethany's gearing up now for Congressional Visits Day participation by about two dozen members in April, along with the new Communicating with Washington initiative that will bring a couple of astronomers to Capitol Hill each week. At the Austin meeting Representative Lamar Smith of Texas made a guest appearance, speaking of his commitment to science and his interest in astronomy. AIP executive director Fred Dylla talked about communicating the importance of science research, and Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg gave a public talk on big science and its difficulties in this economic climate. It will be an interesting spring as we await the Presidential budget for FY2013 (which of course will be out before you read this), and undoubtedly we'll have much work to do to advocate for the priorities of our broad astronomical community.

In December, Kevin and Bethany and I attended an AGU leadership meeting where several different physical society officers discussed how to get science messages across to the public and to Congress. Kevin pointed out that we can all make a positive difference in our communities in this election year by attending local Town Halls to ask our candidates about their stance on science issues. This can be a learning opportunity for our fellow citizens as well. Stressing economic growth and recovery through continued U.S. leadership in science and technology research and in improving science literacy is always an appropriate message. The AAS will continue to issue email action alerts when it's important for the astronomy community to respond en masse to particular issues.

As the AAS elections have ended (congratulations to the winners, who have not yet been announced at the time of this writing!) and we gear up for Anchorage, it's appropriate to remind everyone about the process by which slates for AAS positions are selected. Candidates for officers and councilors are nominated by the Nominating Committee, whose members are elected to 3-year terms; see http://aas.org/comms/Nominating_Committee. Therefore the Nominating Committee is a very powerful committee. Candidates for the Nominating Committee are accepted during the Members Meeting (aka business meeting) held on the Wednesday of the summer meeting. The Nominating Committee members must be full members of the AAS, but otherwise there are no restrictions. Someone must nominate the Nominating Committee candidate, and the candidate must accept the nomination, in person at the meeting or through prior written consent presented at the meeting. So if you want to have some influence on the slate for your future officers and councilors, this is your chance. The Members Meeting will feature a festive surprise in Anchorage, and I'm hoping for a big turnout as I thank departing officers and councilors and introduce new ones, and pass the presidential gavel to David Helfand.

Newcomb (the stuffed) Moose, whom some of you saw at the close of the Austin meeting, is sitting on my computer reminding me to urge everyone to come to the Anchorage meeting. I can't wait! See you all there.