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Dear Fellow Planetarians

Connections

Has your life taken a direction that you had not planned on? If so, how did it happen? What connection did you make that was responsible for this journey you're on? Please think about these questions just for a moment before you read on.

As IPS President, I have instituted a new Ad Hoc Committee called Emerging Communities, chaired by Dave Weinrich, past IPS president. He recently presented a paper at the October 2016 Great Lakes Planetarium Association (GLPA) Conference in Flint, Michigan, titled "Spreading the Gospel of Astronomy Across Africa." He explained the definition of gospel is "good news," and that is certainly the case for astronomy in Africa.

Why did I form the Ad Hoc committee? We have to go back many years and ask again my opening question: did I ever plan to be supporting astronomy in emerging communities? Not on your life!

But then I had not met Dale Smith, past IPS president, who invited me to Sri Lanka for a small IPS gathering in March 2001 to meet Sir Arthur C. Clarke, up close and personal. I came only for the opportunity to interview Sir Arthur. I hired a Sri Lankan television crew to tape the interview for posterity. It was a highlight of my life, a thrilling experience recorded on tape! I didn't think anything could possibly top this Sri Lankan trip.

A surprise in Sri Lanka

During this small conference, I met a lot of wonderful international planetarians who also wanted to meet Sir Arthur. One even mortgaged her home for the travel funds. We knew we would be touring the Sri Lankan tropical countryside in a bus. We didn't know we would be visiting schools and spending our nights into the early hours of the morning viewing the southern skies through telescopes with literally hundreds of children. This was not what we came for! This was our vacation!

To give you an example of our frustration, when we would arrive at a beautiful resort in what looked like paradise after a long day's journey, we were directed to get on the bus again after a very quick dinner to view the skies and teach hundreds of children who did not speak English. You can imagine the complaints. I was the only IPS member who was not an educator or astronomer. As a result, I was paired with Francine Jackson, who helped me teach the multitude of children who were fascinated with the night sky. WOW! What an experience! I'll never forget their excitement! It changed me forever.

It was in Sri Lanka that I met Dave Weinrich, who was yet to be

IPS president. After that experience, we shared a common interest in providing this level of focus on astronomy for the children of emerging communities. Six years later, in 2007, Dave received a call from Jacob Ashong to help him build a planetarium in Ghana.

Connecting to Ghana

Most of you know the story, but for those who do not, Dave asked me to help. I enthusiastically agreed and called Jon Elvert, who was renovating his planetarium and had mothballed a Minolta Medialogue, owned by the City of Baton Rouge. I asked if he would donate it to Ghana. After a lot of time and effort convincing politicians and going through paperwork, Jon handed over his digital projector for the project. We picked it up in Baton Rouge and brought it to AVI in Orlando for maintenance.

Dave traveled from Minnesota to Florida to learn how to operate and maintain the system so he could personally train Jacob in Ghana. Dave also received many instructional programs, software, and shows from wonderful planetarians, both educators and vendors, who wanted to be a part of this great project. The generous spirit to contribute was encouraging and overwhelming.

After a great battle, we managed to get the planetarium to Ghana duty free. It was finally on its way to take center stage in the new domed structure Jacob built with his own retirement funds. That's commitment!

Once the planetarium opened, Jacob invited interns to teach his children the wonders of the universe. Kyle Doane from the Perot Museum in Dallas, Texas, volunteered to spend a month teaching in the planetarium in Ghana, staying with Jane and Jacob in their apartment.

Kyle's wife's work with primates took him to Kenya, where he met Susan Murabana, who had been teaching science and astronomy to students in Nairobi. Dave introduced me to Kyle, and I learned that Kyle had been working with Susan to procure a portable planetarium for her work in Kenyan schools. As a result, Kyle asked his boss at the time, Rachel Thompson, to donate their Digitalarium to Susan. She agreed and the Digitalarium was returned to Digitalis Education Solutions, Inc. in Bremerton, Washington for maintenance before being shipped to Kenya. In order to ship the system, Kyle was tasked to raise thousands of dollars—which he did successfully.

And then on to Kenya

My work with widows and orphans in Machakos, Kenya meant I traveled often to Africa and I asked Kyle to introduce me to Susan. I was so accustomed to working with the very poor that when I met her, I was overcome by her beauty, elegance, eloquence, and passion

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Three friends in Warsaw, from left Anna Green from the Saint Louise Science Center (Missouri), Joanne Young, and Susan Murabana. Photo by Bo Young.

can help and become more relevant in your daily work and for jointly securing the future of our profession.

These are exciting times indeed. We are in the middle of awesome expeditions powered by science and technology and in a tremendous transformation in the way we communicate and interact with all that surrounds us: a revolution for immersive media, with augmented reality, new open source platforms like open space, live streaming, dome casting and more opportunities at the doorstep.

Such 360 media will empower our visitors. They will no longer be consumers, but co-creators bringing their own stories about the universe to our domes. 360 VR already allows us to go beyond the dome and so the dome is no longer our limit!

Yes, we all will need to leave our comfort zone and travel into a largely unknown future with an open heart and open mind. So, get up! IPS needs all of you, and the new young planetarians in particular.

Hopeful for our future

Despite tremendous challenges, I am confident and hopeful about our future because of what I have experienced with all of you around the world. Every time I arrived in a country, even in a country I had never been before, there were planetarians welcoming me under their domes. I never felt like a stranger. There were always new things to learn and new friendships to build, which enrich our global network of planetariums.

It is, however, not just because I travelled as an IPS officer, but rather all of us who travel with a different perspective, since we all are part of something bigger. All of us are ambassadors of IPS and we all share a passion: we care about our world and the stories which relate us to the grand universe, which in turn relates us to each other.

The forgotten Carl Sagan once said: "...99% of all people on earth are born, live, and die without knowing their place in the universe." And I like to add: "knowing about that unique place in space is the strongest force which binds us all together."

Our planetarium is not just about constellations in the night sky and astronomy; it is about us and building context and relationship to our environment, to our spaceship Earth. And in our planetarium theater we have the tools and the responsibility to allow our visitors

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for astronomy. Later this passion was evident when she organized a 2013 solar eclipse event in Turkana, a remote part of Kenya.

Her work involved more than setting up telescopes. She worked with a travel agency to organize flights, trucks, catering, water, showers, toilets, and tents in the desert adjacent to the crocodile-infested waters of Lake Turkana across from the Sudan. She had the wisdom to invite non-astronomers from the expat community of Nairobi's Rotary Club.

She saw a great opportunity to teach, and that is exactly what she did, in elegant style. Kyle and I were there and had a great time! That is where Susan met her husband, Daniel "Chu" Owen, a filmmaker and avid amateur astronomer. It was the beginning of their work together with Traveling Telescope in Kenya.

Jump now to Warsaw

Because of Susan's work and dedication to teaching astronomy, she was awarded an IPS stipend to attend the IPS conference in Warsaw. There she met many incredible planetarians who are currently working with her in support of astronomy in Kenya. Dave Weinrich is currently working with Susan and Chu to forward their astronomy and science aspirations for Kenya. It was only fitting that Dave be in charge of a committee whose purpose, in part, is one he is deeply dedicated to: spreading the gospel of astronomy in Africa.

When I was visiting Susan in Kenya at the end of August 2016, she gave me the exciting news that CNN wanted to film her with students viewing the planets and stars through her telescope. She knew I worked

new perspectives on our planet: of its past, present, and challenges we all face towards the future.

Collaboration continues

I feel strongly about that and so, in the past two years, while no longer in the driving seat as president, I was especially keen on establishing some new collaborations for IPS which might open us such new perspectives.

One example is the now established collaboration with Asteroid Day (see my more detailed article in the June 2016 issue). This campaign includes luminaries such as scientists Richard Dawkins, Kip Thorne, and Bill Nye and astronaut Chris Hadfield, but among others there also are musicians like Brian May, Hans Zimmer, and Peter Gabriel.

So I will continue to advocate for our theaters to go beyond science and for embracing also the arts, bringing artists and their views into our domes, widening our storytelling and our creative potential for communicating with our citizens.

My recent trips to planetarium conferences in Buenos Aires (Argentina), Bogota (Colombia), and Cancun (Mexico) were so rewarding and stunning, because I learned that planetariums in these countries are often much more creative, skilled, and natural in blending arts with science than most of us. Folks, we have real treasures among us—let's embrace them. To quote American rock group Bachman-Turner Overdrive, you ain't seen nothing yet in our theaters!

My own planetarium in Hamburg will reopen in February 2017 after some major expansion to both the building and its technical capabilities. You can be sure that we will not hesitate to contribute to the idea of a planetarium being the stage for a global network of explorers and artists, where people from around the world come together to learn about our world and our future on this pale blue dot and beyond.

As an officer of IPS I was just a "visitor" for a mere 6 years; in fact, we are all just visitors, here in this precious place in space and at this time. We are just passing through. Our task here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love...and then go home again. And this is home for me, this very planet, the best of all planets, and you, my fellow planetarians, will always be family for me. Dear friends, it was an honor serving you. Thank you for giving me this opportunity and such a great time! ☆

with educators in Kenya and asked if I knew of anyone who had a school where the night skies were clear. I contacted my friend, Sha' Givens, an African American who has dedicated her life to rescuing the Masai child brides. With no money of her own, Sha' built a school and dormitory for these girls on a mountain top, surrounded with barbed wire and armed guards.

And to a Kenyan mountaintop

I asked if her night skies were clear. She responded, "They are always clear." I proceeded to tell her about Susan's request to have CNN film her girls viewing the planets and the moon through a telescope. You would have thought I had given Sha' a million dollars. She was so excited about the opportunity for all of her 150 girls, and she has written to me numerous times, thanking me for introducing her to Susan.

Oh, how wonderful it is when life weaves an intriguing web of enriching relationships. I can feel the strength of each string that connects us. Were our meetings by chance or predestined? Did we just make the best of it, or is all of this by design? I can't prove any answer to that question. However, this I do know: the connections that catch us by surprise appear to have the greatest impact on our lives.

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to make a difference, however small, in Dave's, Jacob's, and Susan's lives. The good news is, it isn't over yet! To see Susan and Chu's work and the faces of the students, visit stream-news.com/2016/10/21/travelling-telescope-educates-kenyas-children/. Hopefully, we will hear more from Susan soon. ☆