

# President's Message



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Greetings from a very damp Northern Ireland, although in the past month I have been in sunnier climates in the USA en route to and from my eldest daughter's wedding in New Zealand, as well as in Alexandria and Cairo attending a planning meeting for the IPS 2010 conference. So I have seen a lot of sunshine by travelling half way round the planet and back. Confidentially, I must tell you that being the father of the bride is not all that it is cracked up to be: the upside is that the ocean around New Zealand is a good place to catch snapper. Excellent eating!

I want to take this opportunity to let you know that there have been some very big changes in the organisation of the Indian planetarians. I was privileged to be invited to attend their annual meeting in Goa at the beginning of this year. We had a great time, sponsored by the local company Information Technologies. I thank the two primary organisers, Abhijit and Gandhali Shetye, for all of the hard work which they put into the meeting, and of course all of the local Indian planetarians who assembled for the conference. It is really encouraging to see the en-

ergy and commitment that was evident in all of the participants.

I and the other officers anticipate that there will be a rejuvenation of activity in the Indian planetarium community, as it is right that the world's largest democracy has a voice at IPS meetings. It was also very gratifying to talk to the people from the Indian planetarium community who attended the Goa meeting and to hear from them that the problems that we encounter are global, even if the solutions have to be tailored to account for local cultural and educational differences. The philosophy of spreading knowledge and information remains constant. So I hope that in the near future we can welcome our newly organised colleagues from India to our meetings and conferences so that you can meet with them yourselves.

Another excellent development is the news from Brazil that they are planning to build a new Rio de Janeiro planetarium at Niteroi to serve the large population who live there. It seems to me that the local educational authorities there are taking the long view, and this can only benefit the Brazilian nation as this will surely encourage lots of their youngsters to become scientists and follow technical careers. My congratulations to my friend Alexandre Cherman, who has been appointed as the new director of this facility.

I would like to commend to you all of the people who have been involved in the production of new shows for the IYA 09. I have just received Armagh Planetarium's copy of the *Two Small Pieces of Glass* show which has been provided by our treasurer, Shawn Laatsch from Imiloa in Hawaii. We are awaiting delivery of the new *We Are Astronomers* show from the team at Leicester, scheduled to open in UK planetariums during May. Another new show has been made by the European Space Agency and will be available soon.

You all can obtain copies of *Two Small Pieces of Glass* as it is being distributed free to IPS members. You only need to pay for the media on which it will be shipped to you. So if you have not ordered your copy yet, do so; it is a great opportunity to spread the astronomy message that we have a really cool subject to talk about and that the limits are inside your head: where do you place the boundaries of your imagination?

## The Library of Alexandria

I would like to tell you about visiting the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA: the Library of Alexandria) and its affiliated Planetarium Science Centre, managed by the Director Hoda Elmikaty and her colleague Dr Omar Fikry. As usual, the hospitality of my Egyptian friends

was first rate, and I thank them whole heartedly. At the beginning of May I attended a meeting at the Library to take part in the planning for next year's IPS conference, the theme of which is "Back to Alexandria, the cradle of Astronomy," and I can assure you that it will be an event to remember.

The meeting spaces are spectacular, the venue is world class, and everything will be accommodated under one roof, so your job will be to travel from your hotel to the venue and all will take place there. We are working on some innovative solutions to the perennial difficulty of seating large numbers of us at one time, but the venue has a fine selection of first class auditoriums and display spaces for the vendors.

The city of Alexandria is a fascinating mix of old and new juxtaposed with traditional and ultra modern and is the meeting place of many cultures, religions and languages. The mixture of Pharaonic, Coptic, Arab, Greek, Egyptian, Roman and many other influences is staggering.

From my discussions with people attending the first conference dedicated to science centres in the Arab world in Alexandria in November last year, I am persuaded that in the Arabic-speaking world there is a groundswell of interest in establishing a collaborative network of science centres, including planetariums, across the southern littoral of the Mediterranean, which encompasses all of the countries from Morocco to the Arabian Gulf, and including Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Iraq.

## Exploring battlefields

While I was in Alexandria I had a free afternoon and took the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the WWII battlefield of El Alamein, west of Alexandria and the Nile delta. Like Stalingrad and Midway, this battle was one of the turning points of the war. The Allied troops involved came from all over the British Empire to face their Axis opponents from the Italian Empire and the German Reich. The battle was one of attrition, and was hard fought. The human cost now is found in the well-tended graves of the different combatants.

At the Allied cemetery I found it incredibly moving to read the names of all of the young men from Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, as well as from all over the UK and Ireland, India, Poland, Greece and France. Most of those who died in this battle were in their late teens and early twenties. The Axis soldiers were equally young and they also lie at rest in very peaceful and dignified sites nearby.

The measure of the Allied success in defeating tyranny is evident all around the  
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large groups could split into a number of sub-groups with each group eventually rotating through each activity. Schools would make a whole day of this and we quickly called these "Radford University Science Days." Our numbers have increased yearly such that 2008 saw nearly 1,100 visitors just for these big productions.

Over the years I could never have managed without the help of some Radford University students. Running the planetarium is actually not a part of my job of being a teaching and research faculty member.

Over the past eight years I have actually had only 3 students help me. The first student did this for one year, the next one for two years, and the next, for 4.5 years. This last student, Dustin Lackey, graduated in December 2008 and hopes for a long career in the planetarium field. I currently have a new student running the shows and she should be with me for another one to two years, depending upon when she graduates.

I have worked over the years to improve the planetarium in any way that the budget allowed. That budget, by the way, is zero dollars per year. Nothing allocated. Everything is hand-me-down equipment supplied by Radford University, equipment that I have bought (eBay!) or built, or that has been on semi-permanent loan from around campus.

I was able get the place painted very dark blue-black. I bought the paint and Radford's Facilities Management supplied the painters and their oh-so-quick sprayers. It was an amazing transformation. Eventually Radford replaced the original carpet that had been installed in 1971. That was also transformative, since the whole place is now dark as one would expect.

I was able to update the sound system by using the original power amplifier along with a relatively-inexpensive DJ mixing board. I brought my 30-year-old stereo speakers from home and things sounded better and better. I eventually obtained my brother's old speakers—which were much better than mine—after my sister-in-law decided she was tired of them gathering dust in their attic.

New shows have been acquired either for free (I found that begging is very effective!) or through donations. On occasion Radford's administration has carefully scraped together unexpected year-end funds and used that to purchase commercial shows. In addition to the shows there are always sky tours.

I switched from slide projectors to computer-driven digital projectors in the fall of 2005. Again, Radford supplied the surplus computers and projectors. After a couple of all-nighters installing these projectors, things were looking better and better. The images from



### NASA bring piece of the "new era of space exploration" to Nashville

A full-scale mock-up of the Orion Launch Abort System (LAS) was on display outside the Sudekum Planetarium at Adventure Science Center in Nashville, Tennessee, in March as part of its nationwide tour. The nearly 45-foot-long launch abort system (LAS) mock-up, known as the LAS pathfinder, represents the size, outer shape and specific mass characteristics of the Orion crew exploration vehicle's abort system. The system will provide a safe escape route for astronauts in the Orion crew capsule if there is a problem on the launch pad or during ascent into low Earth orbit atop the Ares I rocket. Photo by Ms. Theo Wellington, courtesy Sudekum Planetarium.

the shows became a number of PowerPoint shows advanced by the operator manipulating 6 keyboards at once and paying careful attention to the scripts. Returning visitors remarked on the continuing evolution of the place.

I have recently been able to take the next step. Dr. Patricia Reiff of Rice University told me at a recent AGU meeting about a cheap

way to create a fulldome setup. Using a quarter-sphere mirror would allow one good digital projector to throw its output over the entire dome. I installed this in January (2009) and this has proven to be a spectacular upgrade.

And at some point who knows—we may finally have a budget. But then again, maybe it wouldn't be as much fun. ☆

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El Alamein site. There is a huge number of new houses, resorts and apartments, all built along the shores of the amazingly blue Mediterranean Sea. More striking still was the El Alamein WWII Museum nearby, where the shattered hulks of tanks and guns from that era sat outside on plinths.

Inside, each of the nations involved in the conflict had their story told with respect: the uniformed mannequins, artifacts and dioramas recorded the common struggle to survive in the desert that was experienced by the German, Italian, Egyptian, French, Polish, Greek, Commonwealth and UK soldiers: all fought bravely and many did not return home.

I am sure that all of them spent some of their enforced chilly nights out looking up at the constellations as they wheeled across the desert's dark night sky, and wished that they were back home. Like many places in Egypt, it is a good place for reflection.

Elsewhere in Egypt the city of Cairo has the

world-famous Egyptian Museum, where the treasures of the young Pharaoh Tutankhamun are on display, and the sites of Upper Egypt are obviously worth exploring as a side trip. In the city of Alexandria there are well-preserved and easily accessible archaeological sites with a Roman amphitheatre, the original University of Alexandria and underground catacombs, all served by knowledgeable guides who speak many languages.

To help our French-speaking APLF colleagues decide to attend, I have arranged with the BA that there will be simultaneous translation services at the 2010 conference with English, Arabic, and French being the languages that can be used. I think that it will be a memorable conference and urge you to consider planning to attend next year.

In the meantime, I wish all of you well in these very difficult times and hope that you see the green shoots of recovery sooner, rather than later. Good Luck to you all. ☆