

GRADUATE JOURNAL

A story to tell

About three months ago, I applied to give a talk at a major meeting. I wasn't sure what my chances were, but I think my research story is interesting and covers an area that is not that well known (pairing-dependent gene expression). Last week I found out that I have been accepted — and now I have some mixed feelings about doing the presentation.

On the positive side, the talk is short but the meeting is big. Even though I won't be continuing in this field, I am excited to share the work I have done. But giving a short talk at a conference presents some unique challenges. To be successful, I will need to be clear yet concise — even more difficult in a limited time frame. This seems especially hard given the diversity of the audience as well as the relative obscurity of my field.

I accepted the challenge because the positives outweigh the negatives. I've given a great deal of thought to what I hope to accomplish at this meeting. I will have the chance to share my story, one that I have been working on for the past four years. And I will gain the experience of talking in front of an audience from outside my institution. I've heard from several different sources that this is a both a good experience and good for the CV. Now it's time to prepare and practise. ■

Anne Margaret Lee is a graduate student at Harvard University.

Horizons in Molecular Biology

Most scientific conferences are organized by senior scientists for senior scientists. They often cater only for a specialized audience with an advanced scientific background. As a result, few young researchers have the opportunity to be involved in planning these events or in presenting at them.

In response, a group of molecular-biology PhD students at the International Max Planck Research School in Göttingen, Germany, decided in 2003 to organize a symposium by young researchers for young researchers. Rather than focus on a specialized audience, we sought to attract early-stage researchers with an open outlook on alternative and novel scientific approaches and their related technologies.

The resulting conference series, Horizons in Molecular Biology, aims to equip young researchers with a comprehensive overview of current frontier research in the life sciences. But learning about the cutting edge is only one goal of these meetings.

We want to help establish an interdisciplinary scientific network among today's PhD students. The Horizons meetings place a strong emphasis on networking. Various social and scientific events catalyse information exchange in an informal atmosphere.

The Horizons meetings have already benefited the young scientific community in Göttingen. Those involved in organizing the symposia have been presented with a unique opportunity to gain experience in fundraising, design, promotion and event management. The first symposium allowed

the organizing committee to forge invaluable contacts, improve team-building and communication skills, and gain new insights into the current scientific landscape.

The second Horizons symposium — Decoding Nature: Hierarchy of Interactions — will take place on 17–19 March at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen. The programme will include a session of talks given by PhD students and a large forum for poster presentations. The social programme features, among other events, a party with live music. As a result, students who attend will feel like they are among their peers, rather than on the outside trying to get in with their more established colleagues. ■

Ralf Jauch, a Horizons organizer, is a graduate student at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen, Germany.
 ▶ www.horizons.uni-goettingen.de

MOVERS Arne Henden, director, American Association of Variable Star Observers, Massachusetts



Arne Henden's first exposure to the wonders of star-gazing came as a child growing up in Arizona, when his father took him to Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff. After the junior astronomer peered through the 24-inch Alvin Clarke telescope, which Henden describes as "one of the long tube ones with all the knobs at the end", he was hooked.

The experience stayed with Henden, and he pursued a formal training in astronomy. He learned early on that there are relatively few faculty positions in the field, so he aimed for contract work, where opportunities are more abundant. He got his first contract

research job while still a graduate student.

"Eventually I worked my way back to Flagstaff," says Henden. There, at the US Naval Observatory, he explored his interests in optical and near-infrared imaging, variable stars and γ -ray burst afterglows. And he also began mentoring amateur astronomers.

In 1997, Henden became involved with the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when he provided photometry for variable-star charts. Soon afterwards, he became chief adviser to the AAVSO International High Energy Network.

Henden's new position as director of the AAVSO will allow him to concentrate more on that interest. The AAVSO has a membership of 1,200 amateur astronomers, and Henden is excited about mentoring this large pool of talent. "They are all very enthusiastic, so it's fun

to work with them," he says. His new job will help the astronomers improve their skills through tutorials and workshops, and Henden will oversee the collation of their results into the association's database.

But there are trade-offs. The AAVSO doesn't have its own telescope, so Henden's own observing time will be limited. He'll have a smaller scientific staff, with only one postdoc to analyse data produced by its members. And he'll no longer be involved in developing new technology. Instead he'll be focused on running the organization. "That comes first," Henden says. "My own science comes second."

Directing the AAVSO is a fitting career step for someone who got his first taste of the cosmos as an amateur astronomer. Henden's position will allow him to help others move, as he did, from awe and wonder to contributing to a real understanding of the night sky. ■

CV **1993–2005:** Senior research scientist, US Naval Observatory, Flagstaff, Arizona.
1985–93: Research associate, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.
1979–85: Research associate, Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland.