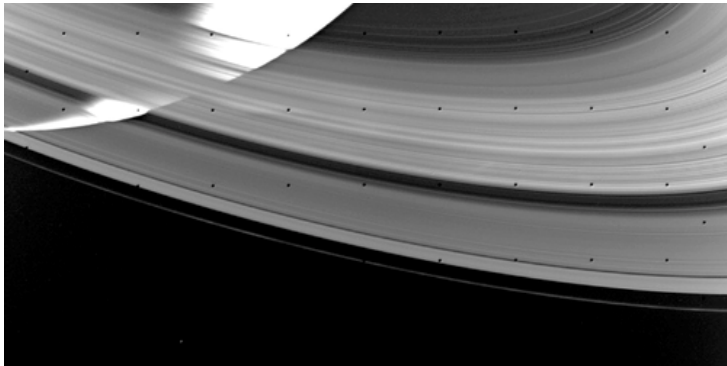


THE VARSITY

Bringing space to the masses

The Astronomy and Space Exploration Society

Dan Rios 07/01/08



NASA

Toronto's Astronomy and Space Exploration Society has a large presence, boasting 1,200 members made up of students from U of T, York, Ryerson, GTA high school students, and members of the general public. This is impressive considering the group has only been around for five years. A great deal of work has led to this rapid growth, including being part of a successful petition campaign to stop destruction of the McLaughlin Planetarium. *The Varsity* sat down with executive members Derek Lee, David Rajzman, and Farnaz Ghadaki of the society's U of T chapter to find out more about this particular group and the work they do.

The Varsity: *How has your group been able to grow so quickly over the past few years?*

David Rajzman: Recently, in order to drum up support, we went to the Eaton Centre and walked around with Derek in a space suit.

Derek Lee: As I danced, the other members talked about what we are doing. It helped to promote our first event of this year, which brought 300 people to hear Robert Zubrin talk.

Farnaz Ghadaki: That was a big bang for the start of the year. In simple terms, the goal of the group is to “educate, inspire, and excite people about space” and [we] accomplish this in a variety of ways. Our first annual symposium brought attention to exploration on Mars using robotic rovers.

DL: We also wanted to bring in astronauts to U of T and talk about Canadian technology and its involvement in space. We decided to go for the biggest event possible and book Convocation Hall. It brought in 1,400 people, including three school buses full of kids. That event has continued every year since then.

DR: This year we are talking about going back to the moon. Looking at the moon from the past, present and future: its origins and history, current missions, and what the future will hold.

TV: *How do you handle financing your events?*

DR: In order to bring in big name speakers, ASX relies heavily on U of T and outside sources for funding.

FG: We get a lot of support from the astronomy and astrophysics department, engineering faculty, and aerospace institute. TD bank has been a huge supporter due to an alumni connection.

DL: But two years ago our membership was 400, now it's 1,200. Membership has tripled. Funding has maybe been increasing 10 to 20 per cent per year.

DR: The biggest problem is that we've traditionally held our symposium in Convocation Hall and they are charging more and more every year.

DR: The cost to student groups, no pun intended, is astronomical. That's why we are holding our symposium at the Bloor Cinema instead.

FG: Although it's been part of the U of T tradition to hold this event on campus, we are fortunate that we have found an alternate location that meets our needs.

This year we are featuring three speakers, one of whom is Canada's own Bob Richards, who is the founder of the International Space University. With our line up of speakers and the Lunar Exploration theme, we expect to attract a large audience and have a full house.

TV: *So besides these events, what else does ASX do?*

DL: We do stargazing and astronomy. Over the summer we went to Elora Gorge to see the Perseid meteor shower, lying there on airbeds and looking up for the entire night seeing meteors passing by.

Also, we invited kids through the U of T family centre for an observation night. We had our telescope on top of the McLennan physical tower pointed at Saturn, showing its rings. The kids who had never looked through a telescope would just say, "wow, this is amazing." This is part of the excitement we try to bring to people.

FG: We also do collaborative events with other groups in the community. Back in June, we worked with the Canadian Cancer Society and set up our telescope in Ernest Thompson Seton Park. Our observing station was received with a lot of interest from the Relay for Life participants. We have also collaborated with the Canadian Space Society, jointly organizing the 2005 CSS Space Summit

DR: For the first time ever, ASX has a balance, half engineers, half non-engineers in executive positions. It shows that space is not just a niche, fringe thing.

TV: *What drives you to promote discussion of space exploration?*

DR: On Earth there aren't enough resources for humanity to live in peace, because there is only so much energy and room. As long as we have finite resources, the world is always going to be in conflict, because if you have something, it means I can't get it. In space there is more land energy and resources than humankind could use in 10,000 years. That's why space is important for further growth of humanity. It puts us towards a future of peace and abundance.

DL: The wonder of looking up at the stars keeps us going.

FG: And our curiosity for what is out there in the universe and the possibility of life beyond Earth.

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