

In the Community

Sharing Science: Seismology, Solar Cells, and Space-Time

More than 2,000 science enthusiasts flocked to campus on Saturday, March 31, for the first Science for March, a celebration of science held on Beckman Mall and featuring more than 50 science activities, TED-style talks, and lectures.

Sponsored by the Caltech Postdoctoral Association; the Graduate Student Council; the Center for Teaching, Learning, & Outreach; and other campus affiliates, the inaugural event aimed to make science more accessible to the local community, especially students in grades K–12.

Dozens of booths offered visitors the chance to explore areas of science including seismology, microscopy, space exploration, and antibiotic resistance. At the CCI Solar (Center for Chemical Innovation in Solar Fuels) booth, kids and adults lined up to make solar cells using blackberry juice and other household materials. At another booth, LIGO staffers demonstrated a “fabric universe”—a spandex sheet stretched over a Hula-Hoop—to show how weighted balls placed on top stretch and deform spandex in the same way the gravity of massive objects warps space-time.

Tara Mastro, a postdoctoral scholar in biology and biological engineering and co-organizer of the event, says the day accomplished the goal of engaging the curiosity of visitors, adding that it was especially rewarding to hear “people in the community asking meaningful questions about the concepts we were presenting.”

Science for March will be back next year, Mastro says, with “more talks and more booths.”

—Jon Nalick



Origins

Subterranean Sci-Fi

The first time Walker Melton (BS '19) went looking for Caltech's science-fiction library, he found himself lost in the maze of underground corridors beneath Fleming House. Finally, he happened upon a nondescript gray door with a strip of paper tacked up that read “SPECTRE.” Melton, a junior majoring in physics and the brand-new leader of Caltech's science-fiction club, opened the door onto a treasure trove he had heard about before even applying to Caltech and was now charged with bringing back to life.

Back in the '90s, this subterranean room—filled with around 12,000 volumes lined up on 52 blond wood bookshelves in a snug, windowless space furnished with a couch, a trio of armchairs, and a round “wizard” table—was a popular destination for the student population. From 1987 until 2002, a student club called SPECTRE ran the operation from a room in the Student Activities Center, loaning out books and playing movies in the screening room next door.

As far as Melton knows, SPECTRE owes its name to the organization that was James Bond's ultimate nemesis, but he says others believe it may have stood for “speculative treasures.” As he and club co-leader Rita Aksenfeld (BS '20) begin the task of resurrecting the club, they have opted to clarify matters, calling it simply the Science Fiction and Fantasy Club. They were encouraged to tackle the rebuilding of the library by administrators in Parsons-Gates who lamented the demise of the original club. The students' goals for the library, Melton says, are to revamp the cataloguing system, make the space a fully functioning library once more, and start acquiring new books.

“It would be fun to work on expanding the collection,” he says, “since a lot of good sci-fi books have come out in the last three to 10 years. It's generally a pretty good collection, but there's still room for more.”

Highlights of the current collection include signed editions of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (later immortalized on-screen as *Game of Thrones*) and Robert Zubrin's *The Case for Mars: The Plan to Settle the Red Planet and Why We Must* (inscribed “Let's make this happen!”); an event flyer for a talk by the late science-fiction writer and Pasadena resident Octavia Butler; impressive collections of Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke; many of Robert Heinlein's works, including *Stranger in a Strange Land*; and Star Trek figurines by the dozens. The library also houses filing cabinets and shelves filled to capacity with short stories, comic



books, and magazines.

Melton and Aksenfeld, with the help of Caltech's Information Management Systems & Services, hope to have the collection fully catalogued by late spring.

“SPECTRE is a remarkable example of undergraduate book collecting,” says Vice President for Strategy Implementation Diana Jergovic. “It was a pleasure for our group to help reinstate this vibrant legacy assembled by past generations. Our hope is that students once again enjoy the books, movies, and special gathering space.”

A May 19 open house during Reunion Weekend celebrated the relaunch of the science-fiction library.

—Judy Hill



Take a video tour of the library at magazine.caltech.edu/post/sci-fi