



# 50 years of science and science writing: Comments on a milestone event

Illustration by Jenny Mottar for NASA

## Comments

### Hosting New Horizons: Memories

Submitted by [irish77](#) on Sun, 12/06/2009 - 6:54pm

It's been my pleasure to host two CASW New Horizons in Science briefings. I pursued hosting the event shortly after attending my first two briefings, the first at the University of Colorado (1988), the second at Cornell in Ithaca, New York (1989). What took me so long? I imagine I wanted to see if the next year's briefing could in any way match the spectacle and high quality of the first. It did. Also, it took me that long to understand what was really happening in New Horizons.

First off, when it comes to CASW and New Horizons, the first person I think of is Ben Patrusky. I had first encountered Ben in Feb. 1988 at AAAS in Boston. I noticed this man who seemed to be in the thick of the action everywhere, the living embodiment of someone with "a nose for news." After attending a couple of New Horizons I realized I'd gotten it wrong. Ben had the nose for what was going to be news, and that is one of the major precepts of New Horizons.

A number of things impressed me about this meeting and made it unique. The presentations were in-depth, the presenters compelling, the socialization was the best of anything I'd experienced, and I realized that I came away from the meetings with a much fuller sense of the institution that hosted. Networking was amazing at these meetings. I never detected any sense of caste in the gathering. PIOs, teachers, professors, famous reporters, newbie reporters, free lance writers--all fit together. I approached the late, great Jerry Bishop (whom I admired for years beforehand, but my God I never knew he wore a cowboy hat!) as easily as Terry Devitt at the University of Wisconsin, or Peter Limburg, an author, or Bob Cooke, another science writer who I admired. I made good friends at the very first New Horizons who remain friends to this day.

One vivid memory I have of the first meeting is watching Jerry Bishop at a pay phone filing a story early in the meeting, reading to an editor from his notebook. I thought: It would take me six hours at a computer to bang out a passable story on any of those topics, and here Jerry's doing it from his notes! That was Jerry for you.

I realized that hosting this event would bring recognition to my institution that would be vivid and longlasting. Washington University needed it. In the 1980s and '90s we were often confused with one of the 21 other colleges or institutions with "Washington" in its title, despite having a world-class medical school, biology and planetary sciences departments, and world renowned computer scientists. And who knew of our beautiful campus? Not enough people, I thought.

We held the first New Horizons in 1993. Administrators liked it so much they told me to try again, and we held the second in 2002.

You would think the second time would be a breeze. No way. When people ask advice about hosting CASW New Horizons, I tell them be prepared to work hard, very hard. Ben and Diane were working very hard, too, and I didn't want to let them or my fellow science writers down. The end result for hosts is a marvelous, though exhausted, feeling of having done the right thing for your school and your profession.

I remember seeking advice from Dennis Meredith. Dennis told me that was a joy and wonder was going with Ben to interview the scientists he was considering for the program. In my case that meant talking to the people I'd lined up, back-to-back, two days in a row, eight hours a day, Ben sitting there and discussing topics with a researcher without, as I recall, even taking a note. The thing was, he'd already done two previous days like that at our Med School!

You do New Horizons for all the right reasons. When Diane McGurgan and I talked at the most recent event in Austin this October, we agreed that you do it for the people, the old friends you've known for ages and the new ones you're making.

--Tony Fitzpatrick, free lance

## **Hosting New Horizons**

Submitted by [Lynn Nystrom](#) on Mon, 12/14/2009 - 7:38pm

In 1978, I met Tom Burroughs who worked with the American Chemical Society. I was a first year science and technology writer for the College of Engineering at Virginia Tech. Tom told me that if I wanted to stay in science writing and learn how to become a better communicator, I needed to meet Ben Patrusky. Who is he, I questioned innocently?

Within the year I was off to Athens, Ga., where this Mr. Patrusky would be participating in a panel discussion at a CASE meeting. My good fortune was I "got two for the price of one." On the small commuter plane to Athens, I sat next to Jerry Bishop of the Wall Street Journal, also headed to the same meeting. I was 28 and in awe. We went out to dinner that night, and it cemented a friendship that lasted until Jerry's death. The next day I met the icon of the science writing council, still "Mr. Patrusky" to me. I walked up to him after his presentation, introducing myself -- just one of many who did so. How had he figured out so quickly I had never taken a physics course in my life? I left that meeting thinking I would have to find out more about this New Horizons in Science Briefings.

So I went to my first CASW meeting at Duke University. I believe it was 1979. I listened to the presentations, and again thought why I am only understanding every tenth word. But I compensated by thinking I could throw a good party. So I encouraged Virginia Tech's College of Engineering to put in a bid to host the conference. We were successful, and secured 1983 as our year -- the 21st annual briefing. I raised more money than was needed to sponsor the event so that I could make amends for my insufficient knowledge about magnetic monopoles. Instead of asking intelligent questions of the presenters, my contribution would be to host a reception with entertainment each evening of the meeting. To no one's surprise, the science program organized by Ben was first rate, with Virginia Tech's clips including Newsweek, The Today Show, and a host of wire stories. The University had never seen its name in print so many times in one week. And each night the journalists were treated to a party with different bands, a new venue for New Horizons. I knew Jerry enjoyed blue grass music, so I made sure I hired a great fiddler and banjo player that allowed Jerry and I the opportunity to "flatfoot." Maybe not "Dancing with the Stars" material, but fun! And one of the highlights that year was the appearance of Chris Kraft, a Virginia Tech alumnus, who happened to be on campus for the week. He participated in parts of our meetings, asking innocent questions from the back of the room during the session on "The Early Universe", until someone figured out who this exceedingly bright man was. The exchange took on more meaning after the presenter realized Dr. Kraft was THE Dr. Kraft who had successfully directed the first flight to the moon in 1969. Dr. Kraft also graced our banquet that year when another legend, Jules Bergman, arrived to receive an award. Mr. Bergman was indeed touched by Dr. Kraft's presence, spending more time acknowledging him than speaking about his own award. The entire event was an incredible experience.

Fourteen years later, I organized my second New Horizons on behalf of Virginia Tech. By this time, the meeting had tripled in size and we felt it was best to host the proceedings at the Hotel Roanoke, 40 miles from campus. I knew the science on the program would be tantalizing as always, thanks to Ben's (no longer Mr. Patrusky) incredible array of knowledge. When Ben spent about a week on our campus some six months before the program in order to interview potential presenters. I arranged meetings for him with specialists in transgenic engineering, quantum dots, supramolecular systems, and more. He entered each faculty member's office well versed in the topic, citing technical papers of other peers in the various disciplines, and asking why his or her research was more cutting-edge. As usual, Ben had the science taken care of, so that left me with my forte – the party! The first step was to use my complimentary two bedroom apartment/suite on the top floor of the hotel as a hospitality room each night of the meeting. There is something about the combination of journalists and free booze – must be the origin of the original win-win scenario. And again, I "upped" the ante, providing lunches and dinners each day, complete with evening entertainment. Free booze and free food – how could I lose? And again, New Horizons was its perennial intellectual success, thanks to that Mr. Patrusky.

In seriousness, throughout Ben's leadership, in conjunction with his colleagues Jerry Bishop, Arthur Fisher, Warren Kornberg, and more, I always found he challenged our minds and we would leave mentally exhausted. (And some of his closest friends would leave with a little less money due to the late night poker games.) But New Horizons always left us craving for more. I do not envy those who host New Horizons today. The job now seems overwhelming with its partnership with the National Association of Science Writers. Each year the act gets harder to follow. I thank everyone for letting me be a part of it.

## **Remembering New Horizons past**

Submitted by James Hathaway on Sat, 12/12/2009 - 7:12pm

As the science PIO at Arizona State University in 2001, I was part of a small team that helped host the New Horizons in Science meeting in Tempe, Arizona. It was a memorable year, with the meeting happening a just little more than a month after 9/11. We were, naturally, unsure whether or not the meeting would proceed as planned – many news organizations were not allowing their reporters to travel, and all of the involved planning by CASW and the university seemed up in the air. Through it all, Ben Patrusky remained implacably, uncannily calm and reassuring. All was in place, he intoned, he had pulled off this nightmarishly complicated meeting for decades and it would come off smoothly one more time yet again, even if we were in the midst of thermonuclear war. Fugetaboutit. He was right -- it all went well, really well.

I actually only remember the post-9/11 aspect of the meeting in the false-memory way people remember crimes that never happened. What I do remember is being exhausted by conference end, with long days of receptions, parties and extra-curricular science events that needed to be shepherded and virtually no sleep for about a week. I keep a picture on my desk showing me and my colleagues Conrad Stora and Ed Sylvester celebrating with Diane McGurgan (taken right after the final session), the way some people keep photos of their buddies from the war. In the photo, I'm so totally out of it I have my tie tucked into my belt. Who knows for how many days I had walked around like that...

You know what? I don't care. More than eight years later, what I do care about – and what I remember best in fact – is the science I heard about at the meeting. Though I was out-of-my-mind busy, I skipped out on organizational duties whenever I could to attend sessions, because some of them were irresistibly interesting. Dare I say it, a couple of those presentations had life-changing effects on my writing interests (notably Jo Handelsman's talk on soil metagenomics, which started my current strong interest in microbial ecology, but there were others too that I remember well). New Horizons is always a great opportunity to have a few too many beers with old friends, but what always sticks with me is the new science I get exposed to. I guess that says something about me, but I think this is basically true of our whole crew. Long live CASW, long live New Horizons in Science!

--Jim Hathaway Research Communications, University of North Carolina at Charlotte