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Michael A. Bennett (1944–2021)

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Michael Bennett died on Friday, October 22, 2021 after a long battle with cancer. He was 77.

The AAS and astronomy education lost a leader and friend with the passing of Michael Alan Bennett. Mike was born in San Francisco on September 12, 1944. Physicist Richard Feynman once said, “Don’t think about what you want to be, but what you want to do.” Mike did this instinctively. He grew up in the era of the Space Race, hearing about Sputnik and the International Geophysical Year (1957), and he gravitated toward all things astronomical. As a youngster, he often went to the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park and almost always ended up at the Academy’s Morrison Planetarium which was the state-of-the-art planetarium in its day. In 8th grade, he wrote a lengthy book report on “The Glass Giant of Palomar.” His teacher gave him an “A” and wrote on the cover “I think you’ll go into Astronomy.”

Photo courtesy of the California Academy of Sciences.

In 1960, at age 16, Mike found his first job at the Morrison. A friend’s father was Hubert J. Bernhard, a lecturer at Morrison Planetarium and he hired Mike as a part time planetarium usher. Later, Mike often said that “I achieved my lifetime ambition — even if it was just a little early to peak professionally.” Bernhard mentored Mike who worked his way up, becoming a research assistant, guest lecturer, assistant manager, and interim Planetarium Supervisor at Morrison Planetarium while going through college and grad school into the 1970’s. The Morrison Planetarium and the California Academy of Sciences have always been a part of Mike’s life. He served on the California Academy of Sciences Advisory Board for almost 30 years. He was also a long-time member of the Academy, the Astronomical Society of the Pacific (ASP), the International Planetarium Society, the Pacific Planetarium Association, and the Association of Astronomy Educators.

Mike obtained an M.A. in Interdisciplinary Physical Science at San Francisco State University. He also earned his California Community College Lifetime Teaching Credential in Astronomy. In 1970, Mike moved across country to Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, to work at Spitz Space Systems where he created a series of widely

distributed lab exercises for planetariums, edited the monthly “Planetarium Director’s Handbook,” and managed the Spitz Summer Institute for Teacher Training in Planetarium Education. In 1972, he returned to California to finish his M.A. while he “rode the junior college circuit” as a lecturer in the Bay Area and beyond. He especially liked teaching astronomy in small domes with more intimate groups of people, and often joked that the educational value of a planetarium was inversely proportional to the diameter of the dome. In 1975 he became planetarium director at Triton College in River Grove, Illinois, where he managed all operations of the Cernan Space Center, but the lure of California and sailing in the San Francisco Bay lead him to return home to his native city once again.

Mike was a yachtsman, and for a year or two, sold yachts. He then found work in marketing at various Silicon Valley start-ups where his expertise in public speaking, teaching and multimedia production was in high demand. He met his future wife, Leslie Larson, while interviewing potential employees for Motorola Computer Systems. She didn’t get the job, but the interview sparked their future together. He remarked that as a planetarium director, he made his living by pointing at the North Star, and then in the electronics industry by counting from zero to one.

Mike joined the Astronomical Society of the Pacific in 1995 as the Astronomy Education Outreach Coordinator, later Director of Education and finally as Executive Director of the organization for five years, ending in 2006. He remarked, “My years with this wonderful organization have unquestionably been the most rewarding and fulfilling of my career.”

At the ASP, Mike led the development of education and outreach programs funded by the National Science Foundation and NASA, including the Night Sky Network, which supports public outreach by amateur astronomers nationwide. He also led teacher training programs, outreach to families and young children, and to professional astronomers through ASP’s professional publications. A seminal NSF-funded initiative instigated by Mike trains national park rangers across the country to establish and develop night sky programs. The goal of these park programs is to help the American public and international visitors appreciate this increasingly endangered resource. As Lassen Park ranger Kevin Sweeney wrote, “[Mike’s] contributions toward the park, science, and education made an incredible impact. I am grateful to have been one of his students.”

While at the ASP, Mike also put together the proposal for the Education & Public Outreach component of NASA’s SOFIA, the Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared

Astronomy, which allows research astronomers worldwide to make infrared observations of the universe. As part of this huge NASA project, over 160 teachers since 2010 have observed its research operations while flying in the 747 jet at the edge of Earth's atmosphere. In turn, their students participate in the excitement of these voyages of scientific discovery.

Mike Bennett's love of sharing astronomy with people is best expressed in the successful transformation of the ASP into a leading astronomy education organization. Upon retirement, he chaired the ASP Advisory Council which provides strategic guidance and helps with fundraising. In later years Mike became well-known for his annual speech at the ASP fundraiser, known as the "Sermon on the Amount."

Mike was the son of Leo and Anne Bennett, brother of Ced Bennett, and uncle to Dennis Williams, Clint Bennett and Zack Bennett. Mike passed away on Friday, October 22, 2021, having lived courageously for more than a decade of his life with cancer. His last day was spent onboard his yacht, Pacific Star, with his wife, Leslie Larson, afloat on the San Francisco Bay.

Mike, fair winds and following seas.

Adapted, with permission of the author, from the original ASP obituary:

<https://astrosociety.org/news-publications/asp-news/inside-the-asp.html/article/2021/11/16/asp-honors-former-asp-executive-director-michael-bennett-who-passed-away-october-22>