

7th Interstellar Symposium - The Hallway is More Important than the Podium...

Joe Meany and Bart Leahy

In our last issue Bart Leahy & Joe Meany reported on the 2021 symposium of the Interstellar Research Group (IRG) in Tucson, Arizona. Here Joe tells us about the informal part of the event. Experience teaches that it's often the personal side of conferences where a lot of the significant results are achieved.

We hope that the International Astronautical Congress in Paris this year and the 8th Interstellar Symposium in Montreal 2023 can be even more productive.



...as the saying goes. Lots of information is shared at the podium, years of work among teams of people putting considerable effort into the breakthroughs that define careers. But the dynamic is always the same: a lead researcher lecturing in a one-way transfer of information to an audience of (let's be honest) varying attention spans and topical understanding.

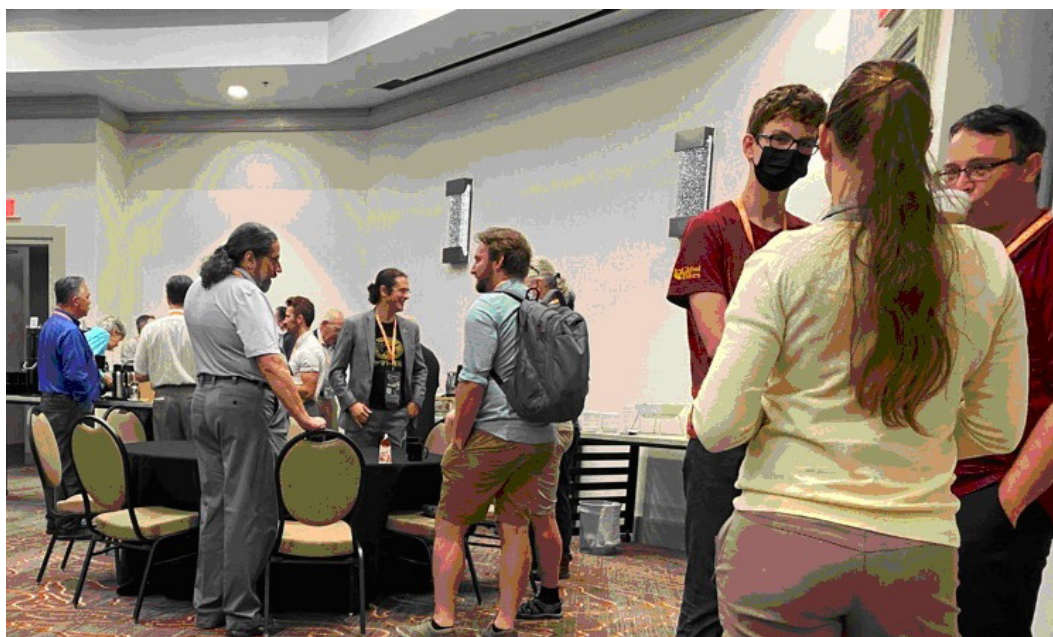
One of the high purposes of the IRG Interstellar Symposia is to catalyze the discovery process by breaking down that monolithic communication model.

The IRG Symposia are designed purposefully to facilitate information exchange. By limiting the number of speakers, IRG intends to build in multiple opportunities for informal conversations over the coffee breaks, catered meals, and the "Hospitality Suite," a purposeful carryover from the entertaining con suites found at classic sci-fi conventions. What are some of the things that happened in these spaces, which underscore the importance of in-person meetings?



Opening Reception participants wondering what the author was up to.

All images & captions
Credit: Bart Leahy



Chatting room only at one of the daily IRG coffee breaks

Coffee breaks, strategically situated to stimulate both the legs and the mind, give the audience a designed opportunity to query presenters with in-depth discussion before the memory fades. Lectures are designed within static time constraints, and we all know that the truly interesting questions can't be addressed within the confines of a quick Q&A. I had one such discussion with Jeff Greason and Andrew Higgins about their design for the accelerated particle beam. Having a background in materials science, particularly one focused on carbon-based nanomaterials, I was struck by their suggestion to use ionized fullerenes (balls of electrically conductive carbon) in their design. We had a lovely back-and-forth, and I got to shine a little by pointing out other possible material candidates based on ionization energies and how efficient different materials might be to use based on their mass-to-charge ratios. The conversation wrapped neatly within the 30 minutes of the break, and we still got to have our coffee and brownies during the chat.

The catered lunch (and walk over to it) are also a perfect time to hold discussions, catching up with old collaborators or just getting to know the other folks at the conference. Lunch spent networking with new colleagues is one of those benefits, and I had the pleasure of meeting Colin Warn, an interesting fellow from Washington state who wants to work on publicity with IRG in the near future. I also had the pleasure of catching up with Brent Ziarnick, who has finally returned from a hiatus from IRG while his career required all of his

professional energies. Brent was the lunch speaker so he had to eat quickly, but the rest of the discussions around the table were professionally lively.

The atrium of this particular Marriott was well-suited to collaborative conversations, as comfortable padded seats with high backs were situated around tables to seat four to five individuals. Groups of tables clustered nearby enabled small groups of individuals to overlap nearby conversations as chance allowed it. I saw this happen no less than three times over the course of the symposium, where nearby conversations would meld together (akin to a reverse osmosis) from small groups into larger, more energetic, exchanges. The height of the atrium carried laughter to the rafters well into the evenings. Even with the muted public attendance, the conversations were engaging. Attendees regaled others with tales about their early careers in aerospace research; suggested job or business opportunities; coached junior researchers about how to grow as professionals in the field; and genuinely shared in the dreaming that makes interstellar enthusiasts of us all. Gerald Jackson, founder of HBAR Technologies, was particularly generous with his advice and guidance. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to spend as much time with him as I did.

This year, the Hospitality Suite was home to a reception for the multitude of volunteers who came together to make the convention a success. Local students sat down to local pizza and snacks to refresh from their labors, mingling with IRG staff and each other. At the session I was able to refresh

my connection with Robert Freeland, a long-time contributor to IRG and Project Lead with Icarus Interstellar. After the technical tours, the Hospitality Suite provided a nice quiet place to relax and refresh. I sat with Yvonne Mayfield and Mark Prusten. Mark shared episodes from his long career in computer modelling for both the sciences and special effects industry. It was absolutely fascinating to hear about early graphics processing, something completely outside of my experience. As a mere consumer of art, I certainly take special effects rendering for granted. Yvonne and I also had a useful conversation, suggesting where IRG could improve in its inclusivity efforts, particularly with students. I'm glad she brought up the subject, as it reminded me why I came to the IRG board in the first place: if IRG is to last as an organization, it needs to include a growth model that accentuates student involvement.

When I attended my first Symposium with the IRG (then, the TVIW), TVIW co-founder Robert Kennedy had asked me to attend something I'd never heard of before. He asked me to come along to a "dead-dog" session. It was a phrase I'd never heard of before, but as a plucky graduate student who was still rather enthralled with being asked to tag along with these fun spacey folks, I obliged. In the dead-dog session we broke down what went wrong and what went right with the session. Much of the discussion centered on pre-planning logistics which I'd not been privy to, so that conversation went a little over my head. But then the attention of the room turned to me. What did I, someone unfamiliar with the history of the organization and the context out of which it sprung, think of the conference? Did I get anything out of it? What could have been done better? Even though my leadership



Bart Leahy reports out on the "Targeting a Habitable World" working track

position within IRG was still several years off, the leadership was taking careful notes of the feedback I provided for the next symposium.

This year's dead-dog session proceeded in that same spirit. Colin Warn attended along with Martha Knowles, Ken Roy, Doug Loss, Andrew Higgins, and Andrew's graduate student assistant Matthias. While there was certainly plenty of feedback solicited from Colin and Matthias, we also geared the conversation toward our next goal: Montreal in 2023! This month, IRG and Andrew Higgins are getting underway to plan the 8th Interstellar Symposium to be held in summer 2023. Looking forward to seeing everyone there! ■



IRG President Doug Loss delivers closing remarks for 2021