

2017 NCRAL Award Winner

Mr. David Leake

Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society

Editor's note: *The following article is a slightly revised version of the nomination letter written on behalf of Dave Leake by Erik Johnson, Treasurer of the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society. It is published here with his permission. This article also can be found linked to the recipient's name on the NCRAL website at <https://ncral.wordpress.com/awards/>.*

Dave Leake has epitomized public engagement in astronomy in East Central Illinois for over 30 years. Aside from his work as an astronomy and physics professor at Parkland College and director of Staerkel Planetarium at Parkland Community College, Dave has been the linchpin of the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society (CUAS) since its inception in 1986. As a longtime member of the CUAS put it to me, Dave "has been president, historian, storyteller, public relations officer, public outreach dreamer, star guide, astronomy dictionary, and the list goes on."

Dave was instrumental in the founding of the CUAS, whose beginnings were tied to Halley's comet. In 1985, to promote the appearance of the comet and to explain how to observe it, Dave ran a basic astronomy course for the Champaign Park District. The students' interest in continuing with the hobby led to the formation of the CUAS. Dave composed the proposal for the club to the park district, informed current and former students about the new club, coordinated the first meeting, served as the president, and wrote the first newsletter. He has served as president for several years (1986-1990, 2011-2014, 2017-) and he has edited the newsletter for 28 of the club's 31 years (1986-2007, 2010-). He also arranged the club's association with the planetarium, which has hosted our monthly meetings since 1991.

While Dave promoted the new club, he was a guiding force in setting up the club's observatory. He served on the observatory committee that planned the site beginning in 1989. The committee acquired a 1920s dome from the University of Illinois' defunct Prairie observatory, leased the land for the site from the university, obtained a Vesto M. Slipher grant to pay for the primary mirror for the 16" Cassegrain, and contracted bricklayers to make the building. He even helped dig the dome footings by hand. In order for the club to hold a lease on the observatory site and maintain the property, Dave helped incorporate the club in 1991.

Dave has been working at Staerkel Planetarium since 1989. As planetarium director, he gives shows to over 20,000 visitors each year. He writes a weekly column about astronomy, *Prairie Skies*, for the Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette. He is a frequent interview subject for any astronomy news, and he promotes CUAS events in the paper as well. The local CBS affiliate, WCIA, often interviews him for astronomy news, and Dave was one of the hosts of *Surrounded by Science* on Parkland College Television. Dave's public outreach factored into him being

honored with the outstanding Faculty Member Award by the Illinois Community College Trustees Association in 2005.

Each year, Dave is present at nearly all CUAS public observing sessions. When sessions are held at Middle Fork Forest preserve, Homer Lake Forest Preserve, Allerton Park, or the Decatur Astronomy Jamboree, Dave is almost always the person who gives a short talk to prepare people for the night sky. He organized the club's events for National Astronomy Day for several years, and has made the CUAS a regular presence at *Science at the Market* at the Urbana Farmers' Market on Saturdays.

Dave has seen how light pollution has grown in our area and strives to preserve dark skies. He has advocated to city councils and to the university to install responsible lighting or light shielding. Recently, he encouraged the Champaign County Forest Preserve District to nominate the Middle Fork Forest Preserve to become an IDA International Dark Sky Park. He is working with them to



complete the requirements.

Currently, Dave serves as the club's president and is on the instrument committee that guides our expansion of the observatory. When the club rejoined the Astronomical League, Dave was the first member to complete an observing program by finding 50 Messier objects with binoculars. He has a framed letter from Carl

Sagan which guided his education and his outlook on public engagement. He has been the dominant force in making astronomy accessible and enjoyable to people in East Central Illinois for 30 years and has been integral to the success of the CUAS at the same time. It is with great pleasure that I nominate him for this award.

Erik Johnson, Treasurer
Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society