

THE ASTRONOMICAL LEAGUE AT 80

By CHARLES E. ALLEN, PRESIDENT

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the Astronomical League. Created by amateur astronomers for amateur astronomers, the League boasts 25 000 members today, most of them in approximately 300 member societies.

A professional astronomer of note, Dr. Harlow Shapley of Harvard College Observatory, was largely responsible for uniting the efforts of two groups, one headed by Charles Federer of The Amateur Astronomers Association of New York and the other headed by Edward Halbach and Luverne Armfield of the Milwaukee Astronomical Society. Both groups attempted to put together a national, or at least regional, organization during the 1930s. Shapley, who determined the Solar System's location in the Milky Way using globular clusters and who had ties with Federer and Halbach through their mutual interest in variable star studies, finally enlisted the support of both groups and held formative meetings in 1940 and 1941. Their efforts were quickly halted by World War II, but Shapley and the two groups rekindled their idea in 1946, and Shapley became the first interim president of the League pending its first convention in Philadelphia in 1946.

Shapley's profound interest in an amateur organization was tied to the crucial role played by amateurs in variable star research and in the discovery of asteroids, comets, and supernovae. Today, ground-based and satellite telescopes have largely replaced those functions, but amateur astronomers in local societies are the only ones capable of satisfying the overwhelming demand for public astronomy education in our universities, schools, museums, libraries, scout troops, public parks, and science fairs. This is where the League steps in.

There are eight pillars that attract people to amateur astronomy organizations—observing, imaging, research, outreach, technology, publications, leadership, and socializing. The League supports amateurs in their pursuit of all eight.

Observing. The League boasts the most robust program of observing awards of any organization in the world. Our National Observing Program Division, run by 5 directors and over 35 coordinators, offers more than 70 regular observing programs, most of them requiring about 100 target observations (some far more) and many requiring analytical skills. Indeed, we are the only organization in the world offering master observer certification (5 levels) and binocular master observer certification. These programs have awarded more than 20 000 certificates and pins, along with national recognition, to over 6000 different observers since 1967.

Imaging. Our observing programs now offer imaging options that lead to master imager certification. Plus, we offer our Horkheimer/Parker Imaging Award with large cash prizes to high school-aged members and our Williamina Fleming Imaging Awards to our female members. Our national magazine is dedicated to the display of outstanding member images. We also conduct imaging competitions and local and regional events.



Chuck Allen with convention chairs, Linda and Lowell Lyon

Research. Our National Young Astronomer Award (NYAA) has been recognizing extraordinary astrophysical research by teens since 1993. The program is open to school



students, regardless of League affiliation, who perform ISEF-level research projects. Our winners receive paid convention trips and telescope prizes.

Outreach. The League is an exceptional source of speakers and both club and public speaking opportunities at the national, regional, and club level. In the last two years alone, I have been asked to give programs in 34 states plus numerous Zoom programs. We recognize outreach with our Master Outreach Award recognition program, with two Horkheimer Service Awards that provide large cash prizes to high school students for exceptional public outreach, and with our G.R. Wright Award program for service to the League. We also award up to 11 Library Telescopes each year to League clubs for placement in local libraries.



Chuck Allen with 2025 NYAA winner, Julian Shapiro; NYAA Sponsor, Scott Roberts of Explore Scientific; and League VP and past-president, Terry Mann

Technology. Our member societies are in constant need of IT support, AV support, and website upgrading and maintenance. The League, too, is expanding its own web team to meet our growing online needs. We also need assistance with our social platforms and live streaming events such as Global Star Parties and monthly League Live Programs.

Publications. We welcome members to submit articles to Reflector and to our regional newsletter and websites. We offer a wide range of manuals for many of our observing programs and welcome new additions and updates. We offer our Horkheimer/O'Meara journalism award to League members aged 8 to 14. We also provide free Guides and Astro-Notes for use by clubs.



Three youth award winners: Howard Qian, Jericho Kuehl, and Julian Shapiro

Leadership. The League offers five national offices, 20 Council positions, scores of regional officers below Council level, and a wide range of committee and convention hosting positions. There's a place for everyone to become involved.



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Socializing. Our national and regional conventions and online activities offer amateur astronomers a chance to make new friends across the country and to interact with professional astronomers, astronauts, authors, television personalities, comet discoverers, pulsar discoverers, magazine editors, and leaders of related organizations like RASC, AAVSO, ASP, ALPO, and IOTA. This year's convention at Bryce Canyon, Utah, drew 460 people with attendant talks, banquets, star-b-ques, country and western shows, awards, national park visits, observing, and imaging. Other conventions offer local tours like Lick Observatory, Yerkes Observatory, LIGO, the VLA, the Linda Hall Library, and the Kennedy Space Center. Our youth award programs give out nearly \$18 000 in prizes each year and bring amazing young people to our conventions.



At the convention: (back) Joe Wheelock, Tony Bryan, Terry Mann, Chuck Allen, Simon Filbert, Zach Harrington, (front) Donna Bryan, Scott and Molly Harrington

So, the League has something to offer to those interested in any, or all, of the eight pillars of amateur astronomy, and we offer it all for just \$6 per club member or \$48 for at-large members (\$24 for youth at-large). It's the best deal in amateur astronomy, and I hope you will join us and find out for yourself why we are larger today than at any time in our 80-year history.

