

First Annual Margaret Address: “The Light Side of the Dark”
March 27, 1971, Reading, Pennsylvania
by Margaret Noble

It is difficult to deliver this address because I really have a detached feeling about that Margaret Noble whom you honored at the CAPE meeting in October 1970. She is a stranger to me, so I would rather tell you about some funny happenings that have helped to make the dark a little brighter and at the same time shaped my philosophy. The very basic things that all of us do every day are the things that make our planetarium programs alive. Since the stars don't help us, we all depend on personalities communicating with each other through various means.

A few years back, 13 in fact, I had the idea that every student in the high school where the planetarium was located should visit the planetarium if for no other reason than to see what was in room 301. No everybody didn't visit the new chemistry lab, or tour the greenhouse or watch the print shop students work the printing press, but I thought that the stars were in everybody's world and even one visit to the planetarium might help someone to start noticing the sky. The teachers were happy to bring their classes, the students were curious about what was in room 301, so the plan got underway. It was pouring rain, a deluge in fact, it had been raining all day when Mrs. X accompanied her eleventh grade English class students to the planetarium. Sunset, Spitz A2 style, took place and the stars began to appear. It was appreciated with the “ooh”, “ah” and “that's purty” routine when the teacher's voice boomed out in the darkness. “Mrs. Noble, this is the most remarkable thing I have ever seen. Would you please explain to my students how this machine is able to penetrate the rain clouds and reveal the stars in the heavens above. I didn't know that they had invented such a machine. Please tell my students.” That was the quickest double take of the year and after my recovery I calmly said, “The Spitz Planetarium Company will be happy to know that the instrument is really simulating the sky as they hoped it would” and went on to watching a day go by. “Using Mrs. X's wonderful imagination let's speed up a 24 hour day into a 2 minute day,” I suggested. I learned that a new planetarium program in a school system should never have teacher workshops before working with students. That incident would never have happened in a group of teachers. I also learned that a planetarium instructor must have ready answers to “save face” for classroom teachers. You could write a book about things that have happened in your planetarium. MAPS members have talked about writing the happenings and sayings and possibly publishing the collection. It would be fun reading, even if the buyers market may be limited. I'm sure everyone here has at least six good stories, that could be printed. Anyone interested in heading up a new project!

Planetariums are wonderful places for distinguished persons to visit and we introduce the students to the visitor and encourage questions. This is “visitor” involvement! An distinguished rocket expert from NASA, Howard Galloway, was visiting us. He has rocket launches for teacher workshops and rocket clubs for anybody interested in launching rockets. He is wonderful with children. The first graders he was observing seemed very small to Howard's 6'3” height, but in his usual good natured manner started to answer questions. A little boy asked, “What makes a rocket go?” Howard said “Oh you can think of a balloon, that is blown up very big, and then let go of

it. The balloon will go swish, swish, swish all around as the air comes out of the open end and that is like making a rocket go.” Before he could go on, a precious blue-eyed blond girl stood up, her eyes about level with the back of the bench. In this charming little girl voice she said, “Ain’t he silly?” She knew about balloons and they were not what made a rocket go. Howard almost doubled up in laughter and promised he would report his evaluation to headquarters. I learned that first graders can up-stage most distinguished visitors without trying.

The usual Christmas program of trying to explore the possible phenomena that could be the Christmas Star or perhaps that “star” was a special miracle had been discussed for a good forty minutes when a fourth grader said in a calm, matter of fact voice, “I don’t know why you have to guess if the Christmas Star was a meteor, comet or planet when everybody already knows what it is, ‘cause the Bible tells you.” I asked what the Bible said and his answer was, “It moved and the Wise men followed it.” “Good” I answered, “and maybe the rest of you would like to read about it in your Bible.” I have often wondered what that boy really thought of that beautifully planned lesson that I tried to teach. I learned again, always consider the effect of information on your class.

A planetarium teacher must be aware of handicapped children, be sure that their needs are met, such as good seats for seeing or hearing. It was late spring, near the end of school and as the children entered, I noticed that hearing aid wire coming from the boy’s ear. “Perhaps you and your partner would like to sit in the front row,” I said. As I bent over to tell him, he nodded as if he half read my lips. A warm feeling went over me for being so alert and I could definitely tell by his shy little nod and angel eyes that he did appreciate my tender loving care. When the lesson was over, and I was still so proud of myself for helping this deaf youngster to understand more about stars, he tapped me on the arm and said, “Hey, you know what? The Red Sox only made two runs in that whole inning.” I learned that classroom teachers can take care of their handicapped children better than I can, also, I learned that ear plugs for transistor radios shouldn’t be made to look like hearing aids.

At the end of a lesson for first graders who had walked in the deep snow from a near-by school, the classroom teacher was shocked. She was standing beside a very small boy saying, as she looked at the big puddle on the newly waxed floor, “You should have told me before we came in.” The child burst into tears as he cried out. “It was a snowball for my mother and now it’s gone.” I learned that teachers tend to jump to conclusions.

Planetarium people are a special breed, they are frank, critical, sympathetic, industrious, creative, argumentative, “prima donnas” and are excellent teachers with a sense of humor that helps them do “their thing.” The children’s request to “do it again” or their exclamation, “I can’t believe my eyes” or questions such as “were those white dots supposed to be stars?” All have to be appreciated by the planetarium director.

By January 1965, a group of nine planetarium people, formally decided to pool resources and they formed this organization, Middle Atlantic Planetarium Society. That initial meeting had a light side too—a January blizzard, a Saturday, no heat in the building, Cardoza High School, no custodian to open a chained door. The determined nine finally got into the building and made plans that have been the backbone of MAPS for six years. We thought we could help each other, share materials and ideas and give some guidelines

for new planetarium directors. Frequent meetings, individual personal visits to various planetariums and the College Cooperative School Science course from summer 1970 have all helped to weld the MAPS group.

MAPS seems to be a doing and talking group, hopefully in the next few years we will put some thoughts in print. Everyone has had plenty of practice by filling out questionnaires and the C.C.S.S. (College Cooperative School Science) planetarium people will write inquiry type planetarium lessons on any subject.

I believe that the light side of the dark is one very important stabilizer of planetarium people.

I am proud the MAPS has designated an annual address in my honor but I must confess that I have had giants as my guides. Armand Spitz has a way of influencing people and the MAPS members who know Armand will understand what I mean. He is a great teacher and knows how to enjoy the light side. Father Heyden at Georgetown, always has time to help you, the people at NASA invite your inquiries, plus the school system that I've been associated with, Washington, D.C. and Prince George's County in Maryland have been encouraging in my work. Therefore, I say humbly, "Thank you."

--Margaret Noble
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