

ASCB 2008: A Light at the End of the Tunnel

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Alex Charron (left), Alex Ayala (middle), and Julie Wang in front of the Golden Gate Bridge

During the third week of December, five Lake Forest College biology students attended the American Society of Cell Biology (ASCB) meeting in San Francisco, California. ASCB is held annually in one of three different locations: either Washington D.C., San Diego or San Francisco. This year's meeting in San Francisco was the 48th meeting of the society, and over 8,000 graduate students, scientists, postdoctoral fellows and professors attended. Only 200 undergraduates attended the conference, and Lake Forest College had a substantial showing. A true testament to our students' abilities to manage their time, the trip also took place during finals week. However, all of us managed to finish our final projects and work their schedules around the trip so that we could attend this prestigious meeting. This meeting provided us all with the opportunity to present the data we have spent the entire semester collecting, and served as a reward at the end of a difficult semester.

Each of the five Lake Forest College attendees presented posters that summarized a portion of the work that will form a part of their senior theses. Julie Wang, a member of Dr. Karen Kirk's lab, presented her work on the regulation of telomere length in the fungus *Aspergillus nidulans* and Alex Charron, representing Dr. Pliny Smith's lab, presented her research on the genetic control of pharynx development in the nematode *C. elegans*. Alexandra Ayala, Ray Choi and I rounded out the five, and presented posters detailing the work we have done using yeast models of Parkinson's disease while members of Dr. DebBurman's lab. In addition, Dr. Shubhik DebBurman and Dr. Pliny Smith presented a poster on the impact Eukaryon has on students.

The poster presentations took place over four days, but a special undergraduate session was arranged for December 13th. It served as a time for the undergraduates to practice their poster presentations before the more intimidating main sessions began. The undergraduate session began with a lecture from Dr. Eva Nogales on how microtubules organize chromosomes during cell division. Afterwards, Julie Wang, Alex Ayala and I presented to our undergraduate peers and professors as a warm-up for the main presentation sessions. Julie recalls her experience while presenting during this session stating, "Everyone who stopped by my poster had really great questions. It was great presenting to undergraduates who were on the same level that I was." Ray Choi and Alex Charron were unable to

present at the undergraduate symposium as they were still in Chicago finishing up their finals. A great keynote address by Dr. Francis Collins on how recent advances in genetics have the potential to impact biological advances followed the undergraduate session. A truly inspiring lecture, his presentation was a perfect motivator for young scientist's to continue the trend of advances seen in recent years.

The rest of the week was punctuated by presentations, poster sessions, and vendor exhibits. Ray Choi commented on the quality of the presentations stating, "It was surprising how understandable the presentations were. At many of conferences I attend, the material is so dense that I feel lost. I was able to follow a majority of the presentations at ASCB completely. It was a nice change." The vendor exhibits were also well put together. ASCB even instituted a program in which people who visited the exhibitor booths were randomly given goody bags. Unfortunately, none of the Lake Forest College attendees were lucky enough to receive one.

The main poster presentations were spread over three days. Alex Charron, Alex Ayala and Ray Choi presented their posters on December 14th. Julie Wang presented her poster on December 15th while I presented on December 16th. During my poster presentations, I was visited by undergraduates, Parkinson's disease experts and inquisitive post-docs. Most surprisingly, I was visited by two of the undergraduate members from the University of Alabama lab that studies Parkinson's disease using a *C. elegans* model system. It was interesting exchanging findings on a common research topic using two different model systems: *C. elegans* and yeast. It was a great demonstration of the most important idea of the meeting: sharing your findings to help advance the scientific field.

Of course, we didn't spend the entire trip presenting posters and learning about cellular biology. There was plenty of time to relax and take in the sights, and our hotel's downtown location provided great access to plenty of San Francisco's best attractions. On the first night, Dr. DebBurman, Alex Ayala, Julie Wang and I ate dinner at a great little diner. The next day, we met Brandon Johnson, a DebBurman lab alum who currently attends Stanford. He acted as our tour guide, and we ate dinner at a fantastic sushi restaurant. We followed dinner up with a trolley trip to Ghirardelli square and indulged in some tasty dessert. After that, we took a stroll down Fisherman's Wharf and were lucky enough to hear the barks of the seals that relax on the docks. Several of us met up with Dr. Smith and Dr. Kirk and visited China Town for a great dim sum lunch. Alex Ayala, Alex Charron, and Julie Wang took a trip to the Golden Gate Bridge on the last day and Ray Choi visited a friend of his at Berkley. On the last day, we took the Bart, San Francisco's subway system, to the airport. Ultimately, the trip served as a great way to end the semester, and all of us gained an appreciation for what it feels like to actually belong to the scientific community. Even more rewarding was being able to present our work among some of the top experts in the field. All of the semester's hard work paid off.

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