

Brain Awareness Week: A Time of Stress and Reward

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Walking into the cafeteria on Monday, November 6th, it was blatantly apparent that this was no ordinary week. Members of Synapse, the college's neuroscience organization, had spent an entire evening painting neurons and brains onto the large, ceiling-to-floor windows of the Gus and Margie Hart Dining Hall and their efforts had not gone unnoticed. But as beautiful as it was, there was no surprise here; the artwork only confirmed what numerous flyers across campus had been advertising, which was the beginning of Brain Awareness Week.

Even for a newcomer, Lake Forest College's Brain Awareness Week is hard to miss. There is an inevitable buzz amongst students a few days prior to the commencement of this annual event which puts them on edge and electrifies them, all at once. It is a vibrant time choc-a-block with seminars by experts in their fields, student presentations, research-based poster displays, interactive models, art pieces, faculty talks, and community outreach.

This year's Brain Awareness Week was no different. The week ran from November 6 to November 11, opening with a riveting lecture on Bionic Hands by University of Chicago's Dr. Sliman Bensmaia and ending on an equally entertaining note, a performance by world-renowned mentalist Sean Bott.

Students of the 200 level biology core class "Genes, Molecules, and Cells" kicked off day 1 of Brain Awareness Week at 12 PM through a series of 1 hour long public seminars on the latest research of a chosen neurological disease. Monday's seminars explored recent scientific publications on Multiple Sclerosis, Rett syndrome, neuropathic pain and the Zika virus. After the seminar session, there was a quick 15 minute break followed by the most popular event of the day: the opening lecture by Dr. Sliman Bensmaia on "Biological and Bionic Hands". The lecture, sponsored by the Psychology Department's honour society Psi Chi, focused on the newest advances in technology surrounding bionic arms and the speaker's own research in that area.

Later that same evening, first year students from "Medical Mysteries of the Mind" conducted outreach in the Mohr Student Center, educating their peers on the fundamentals of memory and emotions amidst the traffic of students going to dinner or making their way to the library. At the same time, on the lower floor of Mohr, Kirsten Riiber and Alex Schwaniger presented "Tangles and Plaques", an interactive theatrical performance aimed at demystifying dementia.

Tuesday hosted the most well attended lecture in the entirety of Brain Awareness Week: the Keynote Lecture. This year's Keynote Lecture was delivered by Dr. James Mastrianni, Director of the Center of Comprehensive Care and Research on Memory Disorders at the University of Chicago. In his talk, titled "Mad Cows, Cannibals, and Insomniacs: The Deadly Consequences of Prion Shapes", Dr. Mastrianni spoke about the discovery of prion diseases, the mechanism through which they function, and his specific research on the subject.

The day ended with brain outreach on language and thought by first year students and poster presentations on the mechanisms underlying post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, epilepsy and Alzheimer's disease by students in the 300 level course, "The Malleable Brain".

Wednesday marked the last day of central lectures held by outside speakers. Wednesday's lecture by world famous playwright Lydia Diamond was titled "Brain, Race, and Theatre". It was based on Diamond's newest play "Smart People", which explores how the brain deals with issues of race and identity.

Following the lecture, first year students continued their outreach in the student centre, educating their peers this time on the topics of sex, sexuality, and sleep. The evening was capped off with the 200 level course Philosophy of the Mind's students presenting on various overlapping neurological and philosophical concepts including "Action and Illusion", "The Brain as the Bayesian Machine" and "The Homonculus in the Brain".

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From there, Brain Awareness Week began winding down. The last set of Frontiers in Neurology presentations took place at noon on Friday and covered cutting-edge research on Traumatic Brain Injury, Autism, Parkinson's Disease, and Epilepsy. The evening ended on a relaxing note with Synapse's showing of 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest'. As a special treat on Saturday, Synapse organized a show by mentalist Sean Bott. With that, the week officially culminated. Overwhelming as it is, Brain Awareness Week is always missed once it is gone. As the campus breathes a collective sigh of relief, there are always one or two early mourners who already miss the thrill of it all.

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