

ASSA AGM 2022/23: Dr Daniel Cunnama's welcome address as Incoming President

Firstly a huge thank you to Chris Stewart for his tireless work over his term as president, and for bringing ASSA to its 100 year anniversary.

I have learned a lot from you over the past year and I have very big boots to fill, but I know you will remain around to give advice and guidance.

I'd like to introduce myself firstly, most of you know me, but perhaps not who I am and what I am about.

I am the science engagement astronomer at the SAAO, and as such am tasked with the promotion and popularisation of astronomy not just at SAAO but in general.

I received my PhD from the University of the Western Cape in 2013 and following that received a SKA Postdoc and then a postdoc at SAAO, and that is where I moved into science engagement.

That was triggered in part by the Gravitational Wave event in 2017 where SALT was the first telescope to observe a spectrum of the electromagnetic counterpart and resulted in a large press conference which I was asked to lead.

I was then asked to lead the preparations for the SAAO Bicentenary celebrations in 2020 including a symposium, public festival and unveiling of the SAAO site as a National Heritage site.

I am incredibly passionate about communicating astronomy and have completed various projects which I'm very proud of, two planetarium films, The Cosmic Savannah Podcast and the Cape Town Visitors centre which is still under construction.

In terms of my role at ASSA, I am of course honoured to be able to serve as the ASSA President. I actually got my start in astronomy at the now-defunct Pietermaritzburg Astronomy club where my father used to take me to the talks and stargazing events.

It was then that I started dreaming of a career in astronomy and I believe that's the incredible role ASSA can play.

It is stated in the ASSA goals that number 1 is the encouragement and stimulation of study in Astronomy.

As I got more involved in ASSA over the past couple of years I have realised how powerful the ASSA network is. It hosts incredible events, talks, publications such as the Sky Guide and MNASSA as well as contributions to astronomical research.

Astronomy is in a truly Golden Era, which telescopes such as JWST, SKA and LSST coming online and South Africa is at the forefront with the likes of SALT, MeerKAT and the SKA. We will also host the IAU General Assembly in 2024.

We are privileged to enjoy huge government support as demonstrated by the Astronomy Geographic Advantage Act, investments in SALT and MeerKAT and the newly developed National AstroTourism Strategy.

ASSA is ideally placed to not only support but drive this future, we have a huge role to play in bringing South Africans together, exciting them, teaching them and inspiring them to create not just the next generation of astronomers but also an engaged and critical public.

I am looking forward to growing ASSA over the coming years and cementing our role in the African Astronomical landscape.