



Michel Mayor. Photos by Alethea Go/UC San Diego Publications

Astrophysicist Inspires at Kyoto Prize Symposium

Swiss astronomer Michel Mayor, one of the world's most renowned astrophysicists for planetary discovery, spoke at UC San Diego on March 23 as part of the 15th annual Kyoto Prize Symposium. The event, which was open to the public, inspired a wide range of attendees, from faculty to local high school students.

Mayor, who received the 2015 Kyoto Prize for his work, was the first to discover a planet outside of our solar system orbiting a sun-like star. His 1995 discovery of 51 Pegasi b was groundbreaking and has spurred what Mayor aptly described as “a new chapter for astrophysics.”

Mayor described the process which led up to the discovery, continuously refining and improving astronomical observation technology, including the development of a series of spectrographs. Today, research sparked by Mayor's contributions is raising expectations that an exoplanet similar to Earth could be discovered in the not-too-distant future.



With the support of the Inamori Foundation, which awards the Kyoto Prize in Japan each year, UC San Diego facilitated bringing the high school students—many from underrepresented areas of the county as well as Tijuana—to hear Mayor's sold-out talk. The opportunity is designed to introduce students to a university campus, as well as to spark interest in careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields.

"UC San Diego is honored to be part of the annual Kyoto Prize Symposium and to host an extraordinary recipient of the prize, who is sharing his research in astrophysics with our campus and local students," said Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. He then addressed the high school students in attendance. "We're happy to have you on our campus, and we hope to have you here as a student one day."



Mayor followed with his presentation, which was of particular interest to a junior from Kearny High named Anthony. When he learned that science students from Kearny High had been invited to the presentation, Anthony worked with his teachers to make sure he could attend the talk, even though he wasn't in a class that was participating.

When asked if he would consider a career in science, Anthony nodded, "I want to go into astrophysics," he said, as he went on to discuss the dimensionality of black holes. "I get excited about space."

Following the talk, Mayor took photos with smiling students and community members, signing their programs and taking time to talk with each person who came up to him.

Later, when speaking with a San Diego Union-Tribune reporter, Mayor recalled back to Switzerland, when he was close to the age of some of the high schoolers in attendance. "When I was a Cub Scout, I was quite interested in the sky. But I was fascinated by every kind of science—astronomy, geophysics, volcanology, oceanographics. The thing that ended up catching me was physics. It's so elegant."

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