

STARS ALIGNED FOR VIC HIGH ASTRONOMY COURSE

March 1, 2021

By King Lee, Class of 1958

As corny as it may sound, the stars aligned about five years ago to allow Vic High to unveil the first astronomy program in Greater Victoria high schools.

A Victoria High School science teacher who was about to retire, an astrophysicist who took over from the exiting teacher, and a philanthropic VHS graduate who returned to Victoria for a visit around the same time combined to create the perfect situation.

Clayton Uyeda was the physics teacher who was about to retire, Jonathan Geehan was the astrophysicist who was about to inherit the position and Dr. Stew Smith, Vic High Class of 1955, a retired Princeton University particle physicist, was the philanthropist who returned regularly to his Victoria birthplace until the COVID-19 pandemic hit.



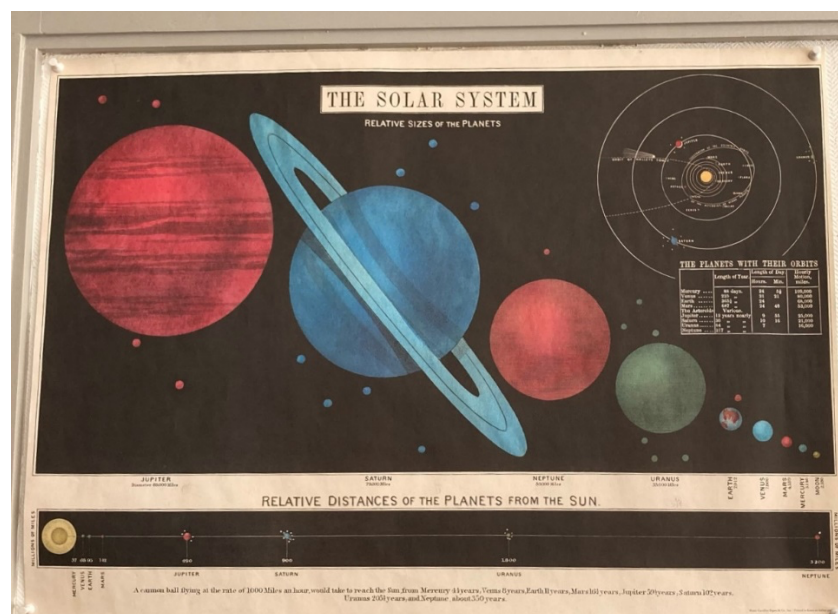
Mr. Geehan studied physics at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland and graduated in 2002. He then studied astrology at the University of Victoria and earned his master's degree in 2002. In his first year of PhD studies, he realized teaching was really his passion, so switched to the education program and received his degree from UVic. Geehan taught at Esquimalt Secondary and Reynolds Secondary, Math and Physics, before getting a permanent position at Vic High when Mr. Uyeda retired.

In 2016, Dr. Smith was coming back to Victoria to be inducted into the Black & Gold Hall of Fame at the Victoria High School Alumni Association's Black and Gold Dinner and wanted to do something for the school's science department to commemorate his childhood neighbour and fellow Vic High alumni, Barry Turner, (Class of 1954) who had become a renowned radio astronomer and had died in 2008.

Mr. Uyeda recalls the precise moment, walking down the hall at Vic High, when the school's accountant informed him that the science department was the recipient of a very generous \$10,000 gift from an anonymous Princeton physicist.

Mr. Uyeda and Mr. Geehan got together to do some electronic detective work and came up with Dr. Smith's name. (After all, how many Princeton physicists were born in Victoria?). Mr. Uyeda emailed Dr. Smith and confronted him with the information, and Dr. Smith admitted he was the person who was reluctant to be identified.

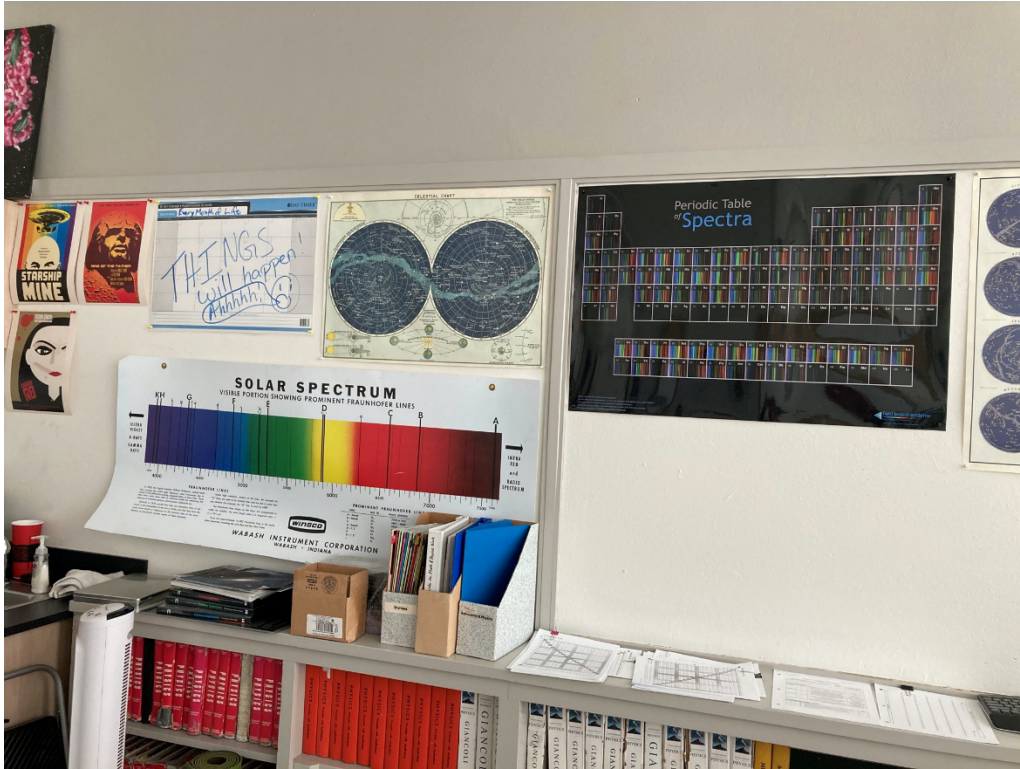
Mr. Uyeda said that with an astrophysicist assuming the science teaching position, it was a great opportunity to start an astronomy course. Dr. Smith agreed, on condition that his friend, Mr. Turner, be honoured.



Barrie Moen, in his Tales of the Attic article on the Alumni Association website "Finding Their Way to the Stars," states that Mr. Turner graduated from Vic High in 1954 and eventually worked at the National Research Council in Ottawa before obtaining his PhD in 1967.

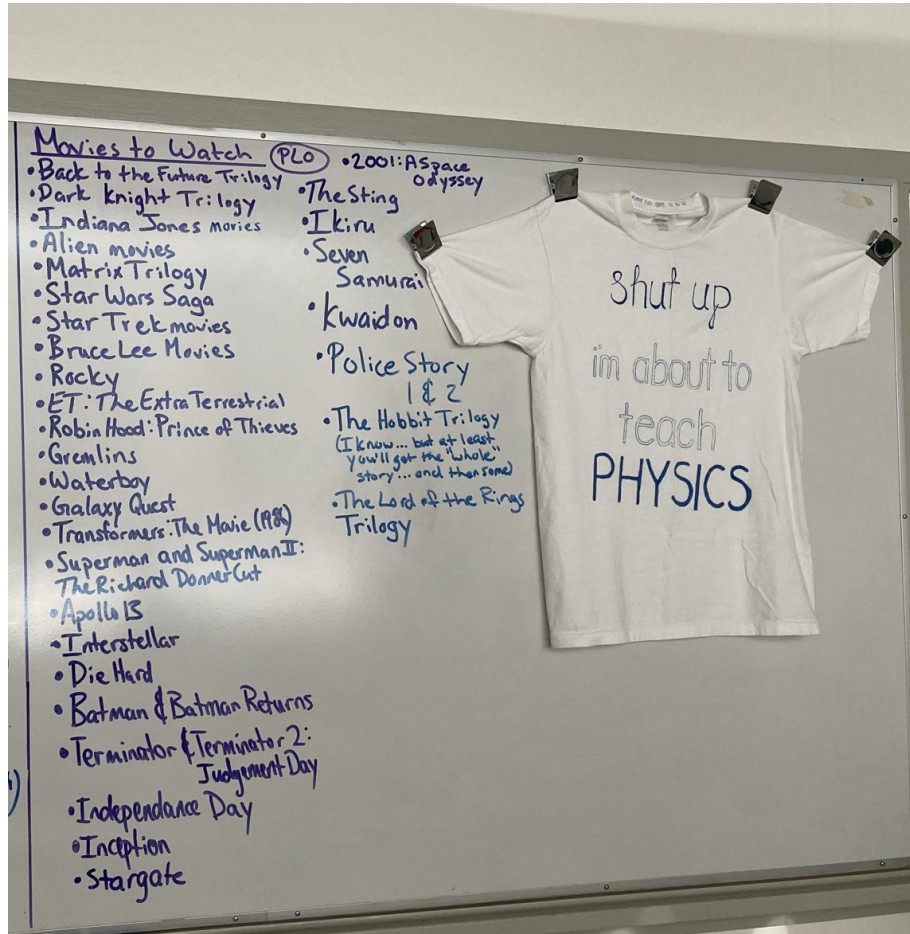
He spent the remainder of his career at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Mr. Geehan remembers he and Mr. Uyeda asking themselves during the development of the new elective course, "How are we going to do this?"



Physics classroom displays include celestial maps found in the Vic High Archives alongside a Periodic Table and a chart showing the spectrum of solar colours.

They decided they would start with the history and culture of astronomy, include the solar systems and galaxies, the large-scale structures of the universe, and finish with students writing a science fiction story based on what they'd learned. It was an approach that surprised and inspired the initial students, who were expecting more rigid fact-filled learning. But it's an approach that likely accounts for the class numbers increasing each year to the current maximum allowable, and one, it's safe to say, strongly aligned with the need to inspire and motivate students in creative ways.

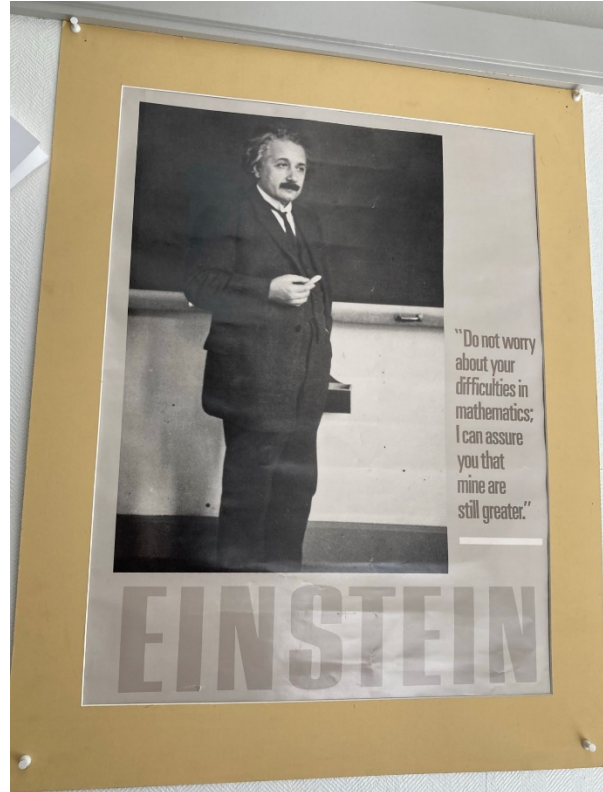


Astronomy is about wonder and imagining what might be possible. Mr. Geehan shares movie lists with students in the hopes those stories might do the same. (The t-shirt was a gift to him from a student.)

Mr. Geehan remembers vividly that the astronomy course dedicated to Mr. Turner started on Jan. 29, 2018, the day his son was born. He remembers because he missed the first week of teaching the course to the first 15 students enrolled in the elective course.

Early on, one enthusiastic student, Seija Zarry, approached Mr. Geehan to start an Astronomy Club, an informal way to keep learning and have fun and a great way to get Grade 9 students involved early in the study of astronomy. COVID-19 has meant clubs like this cannot operate at the moment, but surely will again. It's also meant the current students can no longer have "Star Parties" at the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory. Instead, they now have solar observations at the school.

Mr. Geehan says his hope is that the students will appreciate science as a wonder of the world, by asking "Where can we be tomorrow?".



Einstein watches over students, reminding them that even he never stopped learning.

During a June 2018 school visit, Dr. Smith and Mr. Geehan finally met in person. Mr. Geehan found the Princeton physicist unassuming and extremely encouraging, with a message that seemed to be “What can I do to make it better?” Mr. Geehan said.

The teachers, students, and all alumni, we’re sure, remain eternally grateful to one Vic High alumni whose passion for Vic High and his lifelong physics pal inspired such a generous donation enabling the purchase of telescopes and equipment needed to make such an inspiring course possible.

Check out other related stories here on the Vic High Alumni website.

Stew Smith’s recollections about life at Vic High in the 1950s.

[AJ-Stewart-Smith-VHS55.pdf \(vichigh.com\)](#)

Smith’s donation and the launch of the Vic High Astronomy course, by Barrie Moen, Class of 1969

[VHS-Astronomy-v3.pdf \(vichigh.com\)](#)

Victoria Times-Colonist article about Smith’s donation.

[Teachers-launch-district-June-21-2017-2.pdf \(vichigh.com\)](#)