

SPS Quadrennial Congress Chapter Report

Northern Arizona University

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At 6AM on November 3rd, six physics/astronomy majors from Northern Arizona University stepped onto the train in Flagstaff, AZ, and wouldn't get off until arriving in Naperville 36 hours later. The long train ride was one of excitement and joy, partially due to the upcoming Sigma Pi Sigma Quadrennial Congress at Fermilab, and partly because November 4th promised an election outcome for the history books.

It all started several months earlier when one of NAU's SPS members, Arron Shiffer, decided that traveling to Fermilab was a once in a lifetime opportunity that we couldn't pass up. After many months of skillful fundraising the trip was just over the horizon. Then, on November 3rd, the much anticipated day came as we'll all climbed aboard the Amtrak Train.

The train ride was long, to say the least, but still very fun. We all enjoyed passing through states such as New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, etc. We were able to pass the time playing cards or attempting to complete our dreaded quantum mechanics or astronomy homework that was due upon our return. The most exciting part of the trip, however, was during election night on November 4th, when we all crowded around one of our group member's cell phone to see the incoming results. Once the winner was announced, our group, as well as our other travelers on the train, celebrated while speeding through Kansas during the night of excitement.

Listening to election coverage and debating politics for a day and a half left our chapter with the utmost anticipation. As Barack Obama's victory became apparent, the significance of pulling into Chicago's Union Station on November the 4th was not lost on any in our group. The President-Elect's speech in Grant Park had left us all with a feeling that we were arriving at the epicenter of a once in a generation event.

When we arrived in Naperville, we were excited to finally be off the train, and after checking in we took the opportunity to travel into the great city of Chicago. The pizza was even tastier than we had imaged, and the brisk weather provided the perfect opportunity for gazing at the Sears Tower while reflecting on what had just happened in this momentous city.

The following day, we got up bright and early to visit museums and see some of the sights before joining the Sigma Pi Sigma Congress festivities. Our group loved the opening talk by Jill Tartar, especially one of our members, Marie Burhns, who had participated in an REU at SETI the previous summer. The following days were more than we had hoped for and gave us the chance to visit Fermilab and talk to working scientists.

The unique vantage point of Chicago in the days following the election made our group eager to listen when Ill. Representative Mike Fortner and Mayor Louis Lanzerotti began talking about how we might also effect change on our communities. Mike Fortner holds a Ph. D. in physics from Brandeis University and is the former Mayor of West Chicago. Fortner has also been a researcher at Fermilab for more than twenty years and was recently elected to serve in the Illinois House of Representatives. Louis Lanzerotti is a Professor of Physics at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and the Mayor of

Harding Township, New Jersey. Both men gave compelling arguments as to why young people should be involved politically within their communities. Then in our workshop discussions, we brainstormed ways our SPS chapters could effect change at the local level.

The President-Elect spoke of two words Americans needed to consider, service and sacrifice. On the long train ride back to Flagstaff, we all discussed what ways our club could be of service and what we were willing to sacrifice. We all decided we were willing to sacrifice our time and could be of the most service utilizing our own education to benefit the next generation of scientists. We resolved to get more students interested in science through building exciting new physics demos and reaching out to local elementary schools. We've since started a club where physics majors build demos. In addition, we are working to improve our rail gun as well as build new potato guns. We've also put our twenty-inch campus telescope to better use by increasing awareness of our public night. This allows us to engage in more public outreach and provides opportunities to organize activities around events such as Galileo's birthday, the International Year of Astronomy, and other significant astronomical celebrations. We all enjoyed the Congress (not to mention Chicago's delicious food!) more than we could have imaged and hopefully have come away as better scientific citizens.

