

Alumnus at work: Arkaprabha Sarangi

From India via Basel to NASA.

Text: Bettina Volz-Tobler

Arkaprabha Sarangi is a research associate at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, USA. While growing up in India, he developed a keen interest in all physical sciences. His passion for astrophysics eventually led him to move to Basel to pursue a PhD. From here, it was only a short hop to NASA.



Arkaprabha Sarangi

UNI NOVA: What motivated you to pursue your PhD at the University of Basel?

SARANGI: Nuclear physics and astrophysics were my favorite topics during my master studies in India. At the time, I learned of the nuclear astrophysics group in Basel, which is a very active and reputed group. My future PhD supervisor Dr. Isabelle Cherkneff had just started an international research project called Co-DustMas, which was funded by the European Science Foundation. She was looking for PhD candidates, and I was very fortunate to be selected.

UNI NOVA: Today you work for the NASA. How did you land this job?

SARANGI: I am a research associate at NASA GSFC in the Observational Cosmology Lab, in the Astrophysics Science Division. I am working with Dr. Eli Dwek, who is a world-renowned scientist in the field of infrared astronomy and also a member of the COBE project, which won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2006. Due to our overlapping research interests, Eli was one of my mentors during my PhD studies in Basel. After graduation, I started working with him and won a NASA Astrophysics Theory Grant.

UNI NOVA: What are you working on there?

SARANGI: My field of study is cosmic dust, which are solid chemical compounds found in space in different compositions and morphologies. Importantly, they are the building blocks of planets, so, for example, everything we see on earth, in-

cluding human beings are made up of materials which were in the form of space dust at some point in the past. My primary research goal is to find the origin of cosmic dust.

UNI NOVA: Looking back, what was your most memorable experience in Basel?

SARANGI: When I moved to Basel in 2010, I was traveling to a place 7500 Kilometers away from my hometown. I did not know the language, nor did I have any savings in the bank, as I was just out of college. Everyone I met at the university was very kind and welcoming from the first day on. Academically, I learnt from my adviser how to tackle complex scientific questions, which is indispensable for the career of a scientist. I owe a lot to her for all my success today.

UNI NOVA: How would you characterize the spirit of the Physics Department?

SARANGI: It comprises a very productive and successful group of scientists. The mutual appreciation of each other's work was something that I learnt to value during my time here. I received a lot of encouragement from all members of the group, which has motivated me to pursue research at the highest level. ■



Dr. Ivan Giangreco

AlumniComputerScience

New alumni association created.

Text:
Bettina Volz-Tobler

The University of Basel's degree program in computer science was launched in 2003. Fifteen years on, the alumni association AlumniComputerScience has been formed.

The new group was created to bring together the growing number of former students and doctoral researchers candidates at the University of Basel under the umbrella of AlumniBasel, and to cultivate and promote communication – both among the alumni, and with their alma mater. The faculty-specific group will facilitate networking between alumni and the Department of Computer Sci-

ence with a variety of events, and of course through sharing of knowledge and information.

Postdoc leads the way

The driving force behind the new group, which sprang into being in the course of this year, is the postdoc Dr. Ivan Giangreco. As a young graduate, he recognized the value of keeping in touch with former fellow students and the department itself, and enthusiastically set about establishing the AlumniComputerScience group at the University of Basel. Besides Giangreco, the alumni board includes Professor Heiko Schuldt, a professor at the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, and Dr. Heike Freiburger, program coordinator at the same department.

Giangreco works on various projects at the computer science department in the Databases and Information Systems research group. One of the projects he is involved in is IMOTION, devoted to researching and developing innovative methods for searching extensive image or video collections. The project tackles the problem of how to locate a multimedia file if you can only remember fragments of it. Potential applications of the project's findings include creating a multimedia historical record of the city of Basel, assisting historians searching for watermarks, or filtering news videos according to particular movement patterns.

Interdisciplinary nature

Computer science is a young field at the intersection between mathematics, engineering and the natural sciences. It is interdisciplinary by nature, and deals with the analysis, processing, storage, transmission, representation and use of information from a scientific and technical standpoint. It will be exciting to reconnect with the alumni of this department, now working in a wide variety of fields.

In 2010, the mathematics and computer science departments were merged to form a single department comprising 14 professorships. As a result of this process, the Institute of Mathematics, with its centuries of tradition, and the young, burgeoning Department of Computer Science were combined into a single organizational unit. In early 2015, the department moved from its previous five locations to a new joint home at Spiegelgasse 1/5. The new premises are equipped with workstations, seminar rooms, study facilities, computer labs, and a library. ■

Laurenz Foundation

Cooperation with Schaulager.

Since 2002, the Laurenz Foundation has funded the Laurenz Assistant Professorship for Contemporary Art at the University of Basel, an arrangement that has proven to be a huge success. The Schaulager, run by the same foundation, is at once a public museum, an art storage facility, and an art research institute. AlumniBasel regularly informs its members in the field of art history on current events and symposiums. ■

Event

For young professionals.

Both our private and professional life can benefit immensely from a good network – but this network does have to be built up and maintained. On 15 November, AlumniBasel, VBÖ and VERSO Bar (formerly skubar) will launch a new format giving alumni the opportunity to make connections and stay in touch after graduating. To help get things going, a business speed networking event will be held, followed by a short speech and a drinks reception. Places are limited. Register and find out more at: www.alumnibasel.ch. ■

2018 hiking weekend

Breathing in the Davos air.

This year's AlumniBasel hiking weekend boasted the participation of an honorary doctor. After a tour of the Davos Hochgebirgsklinik, the group made its way along Lake Davos to the Grialetsch hut. A wealth of information on the local geology was supplied by Dr. Christoph Wehrli, formerly a long-time researcher at the Davos Physical-Meteorological Observatory. Also in the group was Wehrli's wife, the translator Irma Wehrli-Rudin, who was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Basel's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in 2017. ■



Book publication

“Gallus, der Fremde” (Gall, the stranger) – novel.

Gall has been living in the wilds of the Steinach valley for more than 20 years when one day a stranger appears. Her questions force the truculent hermit to recall events from his past life: his perilous journey, around 590 AD, with a group of wandering monks from Ireland to the Vosges mountains and then on to Lake Constance, their violent attempts to convert the people of Tuggen and Bregenz, and, above all, the split from his teacher and long-time companion, Columbanus.

In her new novel, Gabrielle Alioth retraces the life story of the eponymous founder of St Gallen, as recorded in the vitae. However, she also explores the constraints and desires that shaped the life of this voluntary exile and dropout from society in the early 7th century. “I find Gall’s fate fascinating and moving,” says Alioth, herself an emigrant from Basel to Ireland. “I would love to know what it meant for this not-so-saintly saint to leave his homeland, and why, after almost 30 years, he rebelled against Columbanus and split from him.”

The novel gives the author an opportunity to put these questions to Gall. “I

stick to the facts, in so far as we know them. However, unlike a historian, I have the freedom, as a writer, to use fiction to fill in the gaps between the facts.” Gallus’s story is echoed in the life of the foreign visitor, who, at the end of the 20th century, finds a home in Ireland only to lose it once again. “The past,” Alioth says, “is always a function of the present. By engaging with it, we learn not only something about what it was like then, but, above all, something about today.”

Gabrielle Alioth was born in Basel, studied economics at Basel University and has been living in Ireland as a freelance writer since 1984. Since 2010, she has been running “Schreiblust”, an annual writers’ weekend organized by AlumniBasel in partnership with Literaturhaus Basel, where people with an interest in writing spend two days writing and discussing their own texts. ■

Gallus, der Fremde
(Gallus, the stranger)
Novel by Gabrielle Alioth
Lenos Verlag, Basel 2018
ca. 250 pages, CHF 29.80

Eventful times at the Nile.

Astrid Frefel spent several years as a business journalist for Swiss daily newspapers after graduating, before taking up a position as a foreign correspondent for central and eastern Europe in Vienna. After seven years in Vienna, her job then took her to Istanbul and finally to Cairo, where she has been reporting for various media outlets in Switzerland, Germany and Austria.

I ended up in Cairo more by chance than by design. After Vienna and Istanbul, “Umm al-Dunya” (the mother of the world), as this mega-metropolis of 20 million likes to call itself, was my third assignment as a foreign correspondent. I had been interested in the Middle East for some time, learning Arabic out of curiosity and traveling in the region. After my time in Istanbul, Cairo was no great leap. I got into journalism as soon as I finished studying economics in Basel, majoring in economic policy.

People often associate Egypt with archaeology and the colorful history of the Pharaohs. However, my focus has always been on observing the political, social and economic developments in this third world country. The exotic culture and the extreme contrasts in many areas of life – between rich and poor, between those with access to education and those without, between town and country – are a rich source of material for many fascinating topics.

What is more, Cairo is the perfect location from which to report on much of the Arab world. My first few years there were relatively uneventful. “Stability” was the catchphrase of long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak, until revolts in the spring of 2011 – primarily driven by younger generations – culminated in the regime’s downfall. The tumultuous years that followed brought instability, political violence and

economic strife, the latter exacerbated by a sharp decline in foreign tourism and investment.

The election of former army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as president in 2014 marked the beginning of a new era in Egypt. “Stability” is once again the top priority, pursued with every means available. Critical voices have for the most part faded away; people are above all exhausted by the struggles of everyday life. Following drastic economic reforms in November 2016, the Egyptian pound lost half its value compared to the US dollar. These are not easy times for foreign correspondents in Cairo, who are expected to follow official reporting guidelines to the letter, stick solely to positive news coverage, and refrain from shining a critical light on the government’s activities. Another noticeable change is that far fewer foreigners live in Cairo after the turmoil of recent years. For the first time in all the years I have been here, I feel I am something of an oddity – hardly the best conditions for making long-term plans. ■



Observing the political, social and economic changes:
foreign correspondent Astrid Frefel in Cairo.