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**Coffee with a dollop of science: UW-Milwaukee physics students teach regular folks about astronomy**

Written by Sarah Vickery

Enjoy a black coffee while you learn about black holes. Sip a cold brew and contemplate comets, or discuss extraterrestrials over an espresso. Spacing out over your drink is encouraged with [CoffeeShop Astrophysics](https://coffeeshopastrophysics.github.io/index.html).

Run by graduate students in UW-Milwaukee’s Physics Department, CoffeeShop Astrophysics is a program that brings cosmic education to coffee drinkers once a month at [Anodyne Coffee Roasting Co.](https://anodynecoffee.com/pages/walkers-point-roastery) in Milwaukee’s Walker’s Point neighborhood. During the school year, students take turns delivering a 45-minute presentation on topics ranging from gravitational waves to the Voyager probes to space debris. That’s followed by a Q&A session with the audience.

“There’s a nice little Venn diagram of people who definitely come to our talks specifically … and then we still get those people who are just regulars at Anodyne on a Saturday afternoon,” said Gabe Freedman, a PhD student who coordinates the CoffeeShop Astrophysics group.

CoffeeShop Astrophysics is not the only program to talk about outer space over a drink. If you ever want to pair the cosmos (the stars) with cosmos (the cocktail), programs like [Astronomy on Tap](https://astronomyontap.org/locations/madison-wi/) have chapters across the United States, including one at UW-Madison, where students and educators can share their astronomy knowledge with patrons at bars and breweries. In fact, CoffeeShop Astrophysics has a friendly relationship with Madison’s group, and the two swap presenters at least once a year.

But at a coffee shop, said Freedman, the UWM physics students speak to a different demographic, like families with young children or older people who may not want to go out for a drink in the evenings.

**Building community connections**

Building those community connections is important to Freedman. Not only does the program raise visibility for UWM, but it opens the public’s eyes to science they may have never encountered before.

“There are people out there who have an interest, and they may not have a community-based avenue to approach that interest,” Freedman said. “CoffeeShop Astrophysics is another way to engage with the public. Otherwise, maybe their only avenue to approach this interest is a Google search or a few YouTube videos. This gives them a way to talk to somebody who understands it.”

Added Akash Anumarlapudi, another physics PhD student and one of the CoffeeShop Astrophysics presenters: “It’s natural interest to learn about these things. People want to know about these things, and people want to talk about these things in a way that they understand.”

Both Freedman and Anumarlapudi joined the group after attending several coffee shop talks and getting excited about the possibility of delivering their own. The group meets at the beginning of each school year to sign up for their date to deliver a talk and brainstorm topics. If there are any timely discoveries – like when scientists, including some from UWM, announced the detection of [low-frequency gravitational waves](https://uwm.edu/news/scientists-turn-exotic-stars-into-a-galaxy-sized-detector-of-gravitational-waves/) last year – the students will try to focus at least one talk about that.

“We’ve given talks now for 10 years,” Freedman said. “I think we’re approaching 80 presentations, so sooner or later, we’re starting to scrape the bottom of the barrel of topics. But the field always changes. There’s always new stuff to talk about.”

**Started a decade ago**

CoffeeShop Astrophysics was started a decade ago by Sydney Chamberlin, a physics graduate student at the time who secured a small grant from the American Physical Society to do a series of small talks as an outreach program in Milwaukee. Already plugged into the city’s coffee scene, she chose Anodyne Coffee as her locale. It turned out to be quite popular – so popular, Freedman said, that the program has continued with funding from within the Physics Department.

“It has since been passed down from graduate student to graduate student, and hopefully will continue,” said Freedman.