



Interview with Carmen A. Pantoja, Puerto Rican Single Point of Contact

29 July 2009

Coordinating and helping with the organisation of IYA2009 on national levels are the Single Points of Contact (SPoC). These individuals manage country-wide astronomy popularisation efforts. They are at the forefront of the IYA2009 strategy, cementing the largest science communication network ever seen. Simply put, without their time and expertise IYA2009 would be an impossible task.

Puerto Rico's SPoC is Carmen A. Pantoja, a radio astronomer working at the Department of Physics of the University of Puerto Rico, San Juan campus. The IYA2009 Secretariat caught up with Carmen to ask some questions about IYA2009, Puerto Rico, and the importance of astronomy.

Why did you decide to get involved in IYA2009?

It was a decision involving the members of the organising committee of the IYA2009-Puerto Rico. The members are astronomers, working at the University of Puerto Rico, and are actively involved in outreach. IYA2009 represented an attractive and challenging opportunity to work together on a project to impact our community.

Could you describe the organisational structure of your IYA2009 Node?

Our node has an organising committee whose members are: Dr. Mayra E. Lebrón Santos, UPR-San Juan, Dr. Daniel R. Altschuler UPR-San Juan, Dr. José L. Alonso, UPR-Cayey and Dr. Carmen A. Pantoja, UPR-San Juan. This committee has invited all members of the NASA Puerto Rico Space Grant Consortium to participate in IYA2009-Puerto Rico. We have established a working group with 25 members. These include the University of Puerto Rico, the Interamerican University, the Polytechnic University, the two principal amateur astronomy groups: "Sociedad de Astronomía del Caribe" and "Sociedad de Astronomía de Puerto Rico", the Arecibo Observatory, and the Caribe Girl Scout Council. We are in contact through e-mail and through monthly meetings at the University of Puerto Rico, San Juan campus.

Why do you think astronomy and IYA2009 is important for Puerto Rico?

Astronomy is very attractive to the general public, and it is an exciting way to reach young students and children and encourage them to have a positive attitude towards science and mathematics.

How do you involve the different publics in astronomy and IYA2009 events?

In 2008 the organising committee thought carefully about the goals of IYA2009 and the particular needs of our community in Puerto Rico. An important tool we used as a guide was a study published in 2007 of the

Social Needs of Puerto Rico that was sponsored by the United Way ("Fondos Unidos de Puerto Rico") and the Non Profit Foundations: "Fundación Ángel Ramos", "Fundación Comunitaria de Puerto Rico" and "Fundación Chana Goldstein y Samuel Levis". This study recommended outreach activities developed with the community focused on children, young, and elderly population, strengthening family interactions and values. In addition to the goals of IYA2009, in Puerto Rico we are focussed on the following:

- 1 - our activities should stress the value of personal effort as a way to achieve goals;
- 2 - reducing the fear or aversion to mathematics;
- 3 - showing the importance of science in daily life;
- 4 - showing how science and technology can help to attain a more just and peaceful society.

What activities have been run in Puerto Rico so far?

IYA2009 in Puerto Rico started with an education workshop in the summer of 2008. The goal of this was to establish a group of volunteers to help with IYA2009 activities. Mostly college-level students, they were named Starry Messengers. Through a NASA Space Grant award these students spent four days at the Arecibo Observatory learning about IYA2009 and working with the general public at the Fundación Ángel Ramos' Visitor Center. This workshop included two blind participants, and materials were used and some were developed for communicating IYA2009 to this audience. We contacted the IYA2009-

Jamaica node to help us with an exhibit of poetry with the astronomical theme of poets from the Caribbean. Two poems from members of their amateur society were displayed at an Open House announcing IYA2009 at the Arecibo Observatory in 2008 with the Starry Messengers. The "Fundación Comunitaria de Puerto Rico" sponsored two Starry Messengers to assist with the IYA2009 inauguration in Paris.

The inauguration of IYA2009 in Puerto Rico was in January and was held at the oldest cultural centre on the island: the Ateneo Puertorriqueño. The highlight of the event was a set of 14 images from the From Earth To The Universe (FETTU) collection, and a remote observing session with a telescope in Texas coordinated with Dr. Lucas Macri from the University of Texas.

Each month in 2009 there have been public talks and observing sessions throughout the island. Professors from the University of Puerto Rico have created a poem and a song to honour Galileo. We had the song recorded by one of the most popular groups in Puerto Rico: the Cantores de Bayamón. We have worked with school groups and general audiences. The set of FETTU images is now a travelling collection for schools with the theme of the Life of Stars. We have created a webpage for the Puerto Rico node to inform the public of our events, complete with important links.

For the 100 Hours of Astronomy (100HA) we had the enthusiastic participation of thousands of people. The activity was held at Old San Juan. We had a special exhibit: a replica of the Mars Rover from Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL). Two JPL engineers: Alfonso Herrera and Carolina Barltrop participated of the event and interacted with the public. We had diverse activities for families during the day and night. In particular we prepared a special adapted exhibit for the visually impaired. We are very proud that the video of the Arecibo Observatory that was presented during the Around the World in 80 Telescopes webcast. Our video was prepared by undergraduate students from the University of Puerto Rico School of Communication under the guidance of Professor Carlos Malavé. 100HA integrated University professors, professional astronomers, and amateur astronomers in an observing event of a scale never before seen on the island.

We had a graduate student from the University of Puerto Rico, Ms. Gloria Isidro, visit Israel and present the activities of the IYA2009-Puerto Rico at the Science Education Conference Marking the Astronomy Year and the Darwin Theory Bicentennial. During this visit Ms. Isidro presented a workshop at the Hated College in Afula on adapted materials in astronomy for the visually impaired.

What do you have planned for the near future, and beyond 2009?

To celebrate the Apollo 11 mission we have organised a discussion panel with experts from different fields to discuss the mission from spiritual, scientific, social and media points of view.

Members from the Sociedad del Caribe will visit the Dominican Republic to collaborate with astronomy public talks and observations in this country of the Caribbean.

In October we are looking forward to the Division of Planetary Sciences of the American Astronomical Society meeting in Puerto Rico. Several of the experts attending this professional meeting have offered to give presentations and workshops for schools and the public. During October we will have the theme of the Solar System and planets. The Puerto Rico symphony orchestra will present "The Planets" by Gustav Holst. We are planning to have several family activities during the Galilean Nights Cornerstone project in October.

We will publish an eight-page astronomy newspaper insert in the autumn, funded with a NASA IDEAS award.

We expect our closing event will be the NASA FETTU exhibit travelling to different locations on the island.

The working group for IYA2009-Puerto Rico has expressed interest in continuing the coordinated collaboration for science outreach beyond 2009.

Which challenges have you had to face as the Single Point of Contact for Puerto Rico?

One of the challenges is to manage time efficiently so the working groups can run smoothly, and the other is financial, to be able to provide the necessary materials for volunteers and the public.

Do you have any message for other IYA2009 supporters?

IYA2009 will be memorable for all those who have participated and a great experience. I would congratulate all the persons involved in IYA2009, the organisers, and the public that attend the events and make this effort worthwhile.

[View all Updates](#)

Organisational
Associates:



The International Year of Astronomy 2009 is endorsed by the [United Nations](#) and the [International Council of Science](#).

