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DR. CLAIRE RAFTERY: FROM MEDIATOR THE NATIONAL SOLAR OBSERVATORY, US

We catch up with former mediator Claire Raftery, a self-described scientist and science educator, enthusiastic, big thinking, conscientious, tornado (moving way too fast and leaving a wake of chaos behind her sometimes) who currently works for the National Solar Observatory in the US.

WHO?

► Dr. Claire Raftery, Director of Education, Outreach and Communications for the National Solar Observatory (NSO)



Dr. Claire Raftery

WHAT?

Claire Raftery began working with Science Gallery Dublin 10 years ago, right when they were opening their doors to the public with their inaugural exhibition LIGHTWAVE. The show piqued Claire's interest as it featured the topic of solar physics, which overlapped with her PhD work at the time. Never being good at staying still for too long, she began working in the evening and weekends as a mediator while doing her PhD research during the day. Although she wouldn't necessarily have admitted it back then, she was always more interested in the "story" of science rather than the process of it, so being able to bring people through the story of an exhibition was something that really appealed to her.

Claire cites BUBBLE as her favourite exhibit of all time to mediate. Not only did she learn loads about bubbles (did you know when they are about to pop when they turn yellow?) but it was also a fun, engaging, (even at times messy!) exhibit to get people involved in. While mediating PILLS, Claire learnt how to navigate communicating science outside of her own physics expertise, challenging and sharpening her skills as a science educator.

Today, Claire has had the benefit of combining her passion for solar physics research, and science communication in her current role. At present she is the Director of Education, Outreach and Communications for the National Solar Observatory (NSO) – a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) based in Colorado and Hawai'i in the US. Here, her role involves engaging the public in space science education about the sun. The NSO are currently building what will be the biggest solar telescope in the world – the Daniel K. Inouye Solar Telescope (DKIST), and the team are hoping to see the first images of the Sun from DKIST late in 2019, which will be 3 times better resolution than anything previously taken of the Sun!

From working at Science Gallery Dublin, Claire discovered the possibility of science communication as a profession. She honed her science communication skills, and while having to explain and engage people on topics that were beyond her area of expertise was definitely a challenge at times, it helped her to work that muscle to the point that she has turned it into a career.

WHAT THEY SAID?

“Science is about creativity and discovery. Whether it is in how to explain a complex topic, or in the imagination it takes to conceive of new scientific ideas. Science is in itself, a form of art. Similar statements could be made for the scientific basis of so much art – the chemistry of art materials, the physics of how media will interact, the technology needed to bring some art concepts to fruition. The beauty of the Science Gallery is that it goes beyond the obvious interpretation of science and art, and challenges us to think about a concept in a new way.”

- Dr. Claire Raftery



Above: A young visitor at the BUBBLE exhibition, 2009

WHAT WERE THE BENEFITS AND IMPACTS?

- ▶ Career advancement
- ▶ Inspiring Career Choice
- ▶ Communication skill development



Above: Opening of LIGHTWAVE in 2008

LINKS

National Solar Observatory

<https://www.nso.edu/>

Sources: Interview with Dr. Claire Raftery in 2019

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