

THE INSPIRATIONAL AND STELLAR

Cries From the Stellar Nursery

In the court of the Trapezium,
Are stars whose motive is betrayed
by their lines
They conspire to vent their angry blue light
Upon the innocent nearby clouds
Ubiquitous hydrogen, now
With electrons torn free from its
kindred ions,
Ensue a charged Coulomb dance,
In attempt to re-engage, but end in
futile bouts
Excepting a high Rydberg,
Their state is lonely without their
partner baryons
How they noise about at random,
Their complaint being heard through the
dusty dark shrouds.

—John C. Mannone, September 1, 2001

By Kent Marts

Faced with trying to find an interesting way to end a community lecture on radio astronomy, John Mannone turned to prayer for direction.

"I asked Him 'do I quote from an astronomy book, read a poem from a poet?', I heard 'You write it.'"

"I laughed aloud, and I felt moved, then started writing. In 15 minutes I had scribbled on the back of an envelope the words that were inspired," Mannone says of the singular moment that he became a poet.

It was a mold that the now 56-year-old never imagined for himself. Even if he tries hard to keep his mind back in his 30s, the slipped disk in his back keeps him firmly in the

present, where he now works as a consulting nuclear safety analyst. Teaching remains his passion, which he does when he can.

"In high school and college I was not a great student of literature.... I did average. I did not have a love of poetry, I found it difficult to understand, let alone write," Mannone says.

So how did a physics and chemistry teacher become an amateur radio astronomer, then a community lecturer, then a poet, in what can be argued is a very narrow genre—radio astronomy poetry, which he's shortened to radiopoetry.

It started in 2000, when Mannone was hired at Cleveland State Community College. Handed the astronomy teaching duties as an

afterthought, he wanted to distinguish the program with what he says is "Something more than a typical astronomy program." A chance encounter with the Radio Jove project of NASA, which "listens" to the Sun and Jupiter in the 20 megahertz range, captured his attention.

"It was an interest that I saw as teachable at the high school and the college level, for the 'wow factor' that grabs young folks, and is a stimulus for more learning for the more advanced folks," Mannone says. As the cliché goes, "It just snow-balled."

He sought additional education in radio astronomy to the point he felt competent. Mannone attended conferences, one at Haystack Observatory at MIT, another at Green Bank National Radio Astronomy Observatory in West Virginia. He didn't abandon optical viewing because he believes astronomy should be studied in multiple wave lengths—optical, radio, X-ray, ultraviolet, submillimeter, infrared—"because it's important to paint the universe and its inner workings in all light."

Having taken the job expecting to teach the standard physics and chemistry, the unexpected thrust into astronomy was a launching pad for a world outside his longstanding paradigm, but he didn't know it at the time.

"I quickly grew to love the subject, I found it to be my favorite thing to teach. It's a great physics laboratory and it naturally lends itself to asking the question—even if can't be answered—about our existence, our purpose, and about God."

Above poem is about the Orion Nebula, a thermal radio source. Presented at the SARA 2002 Conference in Green Bank, West Virginia, July 8-10, 2002, in a talk entitled "Radio Astronomy: A Vision for Community Colleges."

