

My First Planetarium Visit

My first visit to a planetarium was in April 1971 on a sixth grade field trip to Boston. It was a very exciting day. Growing up in central Maine, I, and most of my classmates, had never been to a city as big as Boston. The city itself was almost overwhelming. I have this vivid memory of riding through the streets of Boston in a school bus, windows down, with my twenty-five classmates singing *Born Free* at the top of our lungs. On that bright sunny April morning we felt as free and open to the world as we had ever been.

We went to the New England Aquarium first, then on to the Museum of Science. We had no preparation for anything we saw that day. We were wide-eyed and sucking in everything: sea turtles at the aquarium, skyscrapers, and a melting pot of people of different races and cultural backgrounds that none of us had ever experienced in rural Maine.

The Museum of Science trumped our experiences that day with wonders none of us expected. The numerous interactive displays, the large T-Rex, and the giant Van de Graaff generators sent us through the roof. I'm surprised our teacher could even control us. Then at the very peak of our sensory overload they took us into this extremely bizarre room, the strangest place yet encountered.

The word planetarium meant absolutely nothing to any of us. After seeing the huge Van de Graaff generators and the lightning they produced, we knew that the machine centered in this large domed room was going to be magical. We didn't have a clue how. That moment of anticipation of the unknown has stuck with me to this day. None of us could have dreamed what was going to happen next. At that moment we'd already seen it all, everything the world had to offer, but we were unaware of the limit of our vision. Our day of discovery suddenly expanded beyond our immediate comprehension. When the lights dimmed and the stars came out we left the wonders of Boston behind and become lost in a galaxy of stars and planets. My small world suddenly grew beyond measure.

I don't remember much about the star show itself, only the incredible wonder of it all. We were riding a huge adrenaline rush all day, as excited as any group of school kids that I've ever experienced in my 28 years of teaching under a dome. The only thing I can remember the lecturer saying to us that day was to *quiet down or he'd bring the lights back up*. Can you imagine a planetarian ever threatening that!

Today whenever I have a group that can't get past the wonder of the stars enough to focus on the show's theme, I sometimes get frustrated, but I also understand what a profound moment those kids are having without me saying a word.

--The Planetarian, June 2006, Vol. 35, No. 2., page 31.