

Jim Frenkel's Speech, SF4M 40th Anniversary

Hi, Forumites. I don't think we ever used that term when I started this . . . massive institution that it seems to have become, but it has a nice, fannish sound. Somewhere between a sexual perversion and a bit of officialese. Right.

It's always nice to be back at the Brook, as we used to call it. I haven't been here in a few years, and I'm not here so often as I used to be, since we moved to the Berkeley of the Midwest, Madison Wisconsin, (you do know that years ago, Stony Brook was called the Berkeley of the East, don't you?) so I am probably rusty on my politically incorrect terminology. But it is nice to be back. I had a very . . . well, shall we say *interesting* time here, from 1966 to 1971, the European plan, I believe. And the many hours I spent with the Forum were some of the very best parts of that time. I did other stuff, of course. I was a writer and editor for the Statesman (when it was a weekly, then a semi-weekly, then a thrice-weekly ra--uh, newspaper. I wrote some sports, a little news, and many arts articles, and was Assistant Arts Editor at one point. And I was politically active--is there still stuff like that going on here? I hear conflicting reports.

Back in the day, as they say these days, some of us did all sorts of protest. In Spring of 1967 we --about fifteen hundred of us-- put more than a thousand cups filled with authentic Stony Brook

campus road mud in front of then President Toll's office to dramatize the problem of construction work that was destroying and making dangerous the various roads and paths around campus. A girl fell and was run over by a car because of the mud, breaking her leg, and that, for some strange reason, upset a lot of us, and led to the very first student strike at Stony Brook. And I went down to Washington, D. C. to the Pentagon a couple times with a few busloads of my fellow students, to protest the Vietnam War, in 1968 and 1969. Got tear gassed; felt virtuous. And a bunch of us picketed supermarkets that sold non-union-picked lettuce and grapes, supporting Cesar Chavez's efforts to unionize migrant workers. We also went out to migrant worker camps east of here in and around Calverton and Riverhead, bringing to the workers and their families warmer clothing, extra food, and things like that. It was a very exciting, strange time. We also had the benefit of the wonderful Stony Brook Student Activities Board, the SAB, which, run by Howie Klein, brought a truly remarkable series of concerts to our then humble campus.

Remember (well, I'll try to remember), there were only four thousand students here when I was a freshman. And there were, of course, far fewer buildings on campus as well. There was no union--the union was in the front of the lobby of what is now the old gym.

And there were only two quads, G and H, and H was only a year old. There was no Medical Center, no Social Sciences

Building, no Earth and Space Sciences Building, no Vandergraff generator; no graduate physics, chem, engineering buildings. There was no lecture-hall center; no South parking lot . . . and needless to say, no Field House or Stadium. There was no Administration Building, even. What administering they did was done from the library (which was smaller than it is now), and the gym. What's now the Student Center was then the bio building. And what's now Harriman was the Physics building. I hear they're kicking us out of there. I saw the library and clubhouse last time I was here. It was really cool to see it; wish we'd had it so plush . . . but I guess now you're paying the price for living high on the hog, and are going to have to scrape, beg, and wheedle another space, at least temporarily, out of the powers that be. I hope you can get one that's better than what they've generously given us in the Union.

And knowing that you still have to scrape, beg and wheedle for everything makes me feel so much at home. To put the rest of my time at the Forum in perspective, when I graduated, in 1971, there were only twelve thousand students. Which was explosive growth in only five years (and you don't want to hear how much (really, how little) tuition cost back then.

I know that some--probably many -- of you here are alumni, even some almost as old as I am--there are a couple Eilberts here, hey, stand up guys. Jim Eilbert was one of the people who helped start this. The things we Medical and Dentistry, the Social Sciences

little later, too. You do know I didn't do this all by myself, right? Nor did I build the pyramids, or vandalize the old "computer center" building . . . but that's another story.

There were a bunch of us when we started out. And I suspect that those of you who weren't there might like to know a little about how it all happened. So, unless you start to boo and say, screw that shit, fuck you (I'm honored, of course, if you say that--makes me feel even more at home) I'll talk about it for just a few minutes.

It all started, really, when I was in high school, Jamaica High, in Queens, in the city--you know which city, which is nice. Out in Madison, they call it "the East Coast . . ." Long story. A friend of mine, Mark Levy, was a clarinet player in the school senior band. I played trumpet in it. We also were in a few classes together, and got to be friends. Part of our friendship was that we both read science fiction (which we called SF, not sci-fi. Another long story.) Mark had a great idea. He suggested starting a student science fiction magazine, and he asked if I'd help. Sure, I said. Other people helped too, of course. It was called *Nebula*. This was a year before the Nebula Award started. They stole that from us, obviously.

O.K. So I graduated from Jamaica in 1966, went to Stony Brook, and a couple years passed, I discovered, not necessarily in that order, sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, and in my Junior year, Fall '68, Charlie Knopf, who was friends with my suitemate Eliot Jacobs, happened to tell Eliot that I had been involved with SF in start this wild thing we have. And his brother Dave was involved a

high school. Charlie had also gone to Jamaica, a couple years behind me. And Eliot, who was really a pain in the ass (but only in the nicest way), said, “Hey, Jim. Why don't YOU start a science fiction club here?” . . . He seemed to miss the point that I hadn't started one in high school. Actually, in retrospect, I think he really didn't want to know that I wasn't the mover and shaker in high school. Whether he knew it or not, that fact didn't deter him.

Eliot and Charlie badgered me and worse yet, they flattered me. Especially Eliot. He was one of those annoyingly cheerful guys who was always, at that point in his life anyway, upbeat and friendly. And finally, I gave in and said, “Okay. If you guys will help me, I'll try to do this thing.

And then, it seemed, fate stepped in. Club night used to be held in the old gym. But the campus was growing. We lived in the almost-new Roth quad, and instead of club night being in the gym, it was for the first time being held all over campus, with clubs having tables or whatever in various residential colleges, organized alphabetically. And by bizarre coincidence--kismet? serendipity? Murphy's Law--it depends on your point of view--the Esses were in our dorm, Joseph Henry College (before it was Hendrix College). So we put up a sign that Eliot made, between the year book *Specula* and, I think, a Science Club, for the, I decided, Science Fiction Forum (it sounded better than club I thought). And people started

coming to see us. We had a signup sheet, and when they asked what the club would do . . . well, I basically made it all up as the night went on. “We'll have a library . . . we'll show movies . . . we'll invite writers to speak . . . we'll take trips . . . we'll have fun.” I was being as creative as I could be, and I'm sure I was getting carried away by the excitement of starting something new, even if it hadn't been my idea. I loved science fiction—hell, I still do, after all these years. So this wasn't hard to get excited about.

Remember, it was 1968. And while that was a truly terrible, apocalyptic year with assassinations, political upheaval here and abroad and a war in Vietnam that was getting nothing but worse, it was also a time when science fiction was becoming more and more relevant to life as we knew it. The Apollo space program was getting closer and closer to actually sending someone to the moon; music had undergone its amazing change from something called “folk rock” to hard rock, acid rock, with bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jethro Tull, the Jefferson Airplane, Cream, The Grateful Dead, The Who. The Doors . . . and many others creating sounds unlike anything ever heard before. It was cosmic. And science fiction itself was undergoing a real change. It was full of writers who didn't just want to tell a story; they wanted to change the world. Writers like Frederik Pohl, Harlan Ellison (who doesn't, officially, consider himself a science fiction writer, but people who like him (it sounds better than club, I thought) And people started

yourselves.) And others like Michael Moorcock, John Brunner, Philip K. Dick, Theodore Sturgeon, Philip Jose Farmer, Clifford D. Simak . . . and many others. It was enormously exciting.

No, it wasn't at all hard to get excited about starting a club at Stony Brook. Sometime during the evening, after there were a bunch of names and campus phone numbers on the sign-up sheet, someone must have asked what happens next, and so I said we'd have an organizational meeting in a few weeks. As I recall, there were something like sixty names by the end of the night, and suddenly I was terrified. This started out as a total lark. Now we had to get organized!

We put up posters--xeroxed posters designed by Eliot and company--in all the dorms (which by then included Roth and Tabler quads), and a few weeks later, it had to be late October by now, we had our first meeting, in the big Henry college lounge. I think about forty people showed up. Only forty. I was shocked, appalled. I thought maybe ten or fifteen people would show up.

I had no idea what to do. All I knew was that this hadn't been my idea in the first place, and I wanted someone else to take on what seemed like the hugely difficult task of running a club that was clearly going to take a major commitment of time, so that I could have more time for what mattered most, those three things I already mentioned (and the track team . . . oh, and playing in the school

band, and the jazz band. And one more thing. Wait, it'll come to me: oh, yeah. classes. Right.

So I asked for people to volunteer to be president of the club . . . and nobody volunteered. They were all looking at me, and I couldn't deny that, no matter how I got roped into it, I was the one who essentially conned them all into signing up in the first place. There was a really awful moment when I realized that if I didn't do something, this whole thing was going to be over before it started. So I volunteered to be president of the club, and was voted into office.

Then I asked for people to volunteer to be in charge of various part of the club's activities--the library, films, etc. And people volunteered. Thank god! Jim Eilbert volunteered to run the movie stuff, a guy named Ron Rosenbaum volunteered to be head librarian and help organize the library, and other people volunteered to help out with other things: publicity, like making posters and helping to put them up, being librarians for various hours, etc. etc.

So we got going. And we really did have a lot of fun. I had to figure out how to get us space for the library. I got the college to let us use a room in the basement; I got Student polity--I hear that the Forum recently destroyed Polity. Way to go, guys. Sounds like it was the right thing to do. Corrupt politicians know no minimum age, do they? --Anyway, I got them to give us some money for a trip to mentioned (and the track team, sth and playing in the school 2001. A Space Odyssey--it was still a new film then.) I got the

University Housing Authority (I can't remember now what its official name was, but that's what they were in charge of--dorms, and money to maintain, fix, supply them with whatever--to put in electrical outlets and a phone. The phone only worked on campus, but that was good enough. We used it to bug people who were late returning their books to the SF Library. I'm not quite sure how I convinced them to give us the phone, but I started learning how to get people to do things that they didn't know they wanted to do for me and the members of the Forum--the many members.

We somehow managed to get enough materials for a bunch of bookshelves. Remember, there was a lot of construction going on around campus in those days. An amazing number of bricks disappeared from various building sites, apparently. And we bought wood for shelves with donations we got from the movies we showed.

And someone gave us money for subscriptions to science-fiction magazines, like *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Analog*, *Galaxy*, *Worlds of If*. The college gave us some money to buy some books and to rent movies that we would show to big crowds, seriously big crowds. We would have the old Chem or Physics building auditoriums completely filled with hundreds of people, and we (well, I, being shameless) would ask for donations. They didn't have to give us donations. But they often did, enough so that we could buy more books, and do some other stuff, like bring *2001: A Space Odyssey*--it was still a new film then.; I got the

Samuel R. Delany to campus to talk to the club about his work, and have the occasional club party, a barbecue, or something like this banquet, even.

And my friend Mark Levy, who's fault it was that this all got started, helped by donating his entire SF collection to form the core of our library, about two hundred thirty books altogether. I think there are more now . . . you can correct me if I'm wrong . . . I've been greatly impressed by the size of the library, which I know had to be pretty much completely replaced after the unfortunate and suspicious fire that forced it to move from what was then Hendrix College.

When we started, we had a hard-core membership of about fifteen or twenty people. Among us, we would organize or be in charge of or help out with just about anything we had to do for the Forum. If you know any of these people, or any of you are here, shout out. In addition to the people I already mentioned, there were Janice Jaraslow, Malinda Kohlmeier, Sharon Kenelty, Judy Levitsky, Andy Sincinito (who unfortunately is not with us anymore), Rosemary Garcia, and I know I'm leaving out many people's names, but hell, this was a little over forty years ago, so please cut me a little slack. And various roommates and friends of members helped out (or sometimes they wanted to help and ended up making things more difficult. I remember a guy named Rosen, that of Edward's roommates, who started some shit out of a couple being us

one night with a bow and arrow . . . but that's another story. Rosemary and I took a trip up to Boskone in February 1969 to do some research. We'd heard about the MIT SF library, and we thought Boskone would be a great time to go to Boston and check out the MIT library, and also see what an SF convention was like. We stayed in a dorm room at MIT that Dan Weinberg, who had just transferred from Stony Brook to MIT got for us. (I've always wondered what's become of him. He's the only person I have ever known who transferred to MIT from Stony Brook because he thought the Physics major at Stony Brook wasn't tough enough. The guy was *smart!*) The MIT library was intimidating. They had a *real* SF library, with fancy bookcases, more than ten thousand books, a database of SF magazines, all sorts of stuff. It was also inspiring, as was Boskone 6 (pretty sure it was number 6) Young, beautiful, talented Anne McCaffrey was the Guest of Honor, and Isaac Asimov was there, too, being a Boston guy at that point. It was all lots of fun and impressive. It also convinced me that it would be totally insane to ever try to run a convention at Stony Brook. I'm so glad we never did that.

After a while I started to think that this thing might survive, but only if I didn't stay the president of the Forum. I'd seen clubs start and be run by some particular one person, and when that person stopped running it, the club kind of died. The Forum was doing such cool stuff and so many people were enjoying what we did, that

I thought it would be a shame if it were to die because I just stopped running it. The only way I could see to keep it going was if someone else started running it while I was still around so they could ask me advice and I could help out if necessary. So at some point I convinced someone else to be in charge, and various people have been doing that for . . . well, ever since. Andy Sincinito was in charge at one point; another time, Lou Stathis and Norm Hochberg were in charge. Norm is a sound editor in Hollywood now; Lou worked for me at Dell books in the late 1970s and then became an editor himself, working at *Heavy Metal*, D C Comics, and *High Society*, not in that order. Unfortunately, Lou died in his late 40s when he was really at the peak of his powers at DC. he was a terrific editor and a very good friend, and I still miss him. And that's the only sad part about this event. Forty years is a long enough time that people are going to start dying. Hell, people died when I was still at Stony Brook, but not members of the Forum. It's part of life, but we don't have to like it.

But a lot of people are still alive, and doing cool stuff. Jim Eilbert, who was in charge of the Forum at one point, is a scientist--I could tell you what he does, but some of it is for the government, so if I told you, I'd have to kill you. And there are too many of you for me to get you all. So you're on your own. And I, against all odds, actually work as a book editor, editing, bizarrely, science fiction and fantasy, as well as lots of other kinds of books. But I am not a fan, that

are still my first love. Actually, SF was first. I remember in my Freshman year, before the Forum, there were these weird people--they dressed in kind of funky, Bohemian clothes—colorful flannel shirts and dungarees; old-world kinds of dresses (mostly the girls wore dresses, the guys the dungarees) when the rest of us were wearing button-down collar shirts, real shoes, and Kakhi pants. These people—they were called “ethnics”—don’t ask me why; they just were—and they would stay up all hours of the night, and they were all really into these buttons that said things like "Welcome to Middle Earth" and "Frodo Lives." I couldn't stand it when one of them, a girl I went to high school with, Lorraine Kawecky, told me I really had to read Tolkien. I hate it when people tell me what to do. So I didn't read Tolkien until about 1987. (and loved it, of course, but that's another story.)

As a matter of fact, after the job interview that landed me my first job in publishing, at a little publisher called Award Books, my future boss checked up on only one item in my resume. I put on there that I founded and ran the SF Forum. They actually called Stony Brook and someone must have told them it was all true. Because I got the job, and got to work on a couple anthologies, *The Best of Galaxy* and *The Best of If*. At the time, both magazines were published by the same company that owned Award Books. Who knows if I would have gotten the job if I hadn't started this club? And it gets as lots worse. Heh, small books. But SF and fantasy,

Joan D. Vinge, who would have loved being here for this, but is busy trying to get better from a car accident we had some years ago, and also she's working, slowly but surely but faster every day, after a long, difficult recovery, on a new novel. And we have kids, and a house, and all that stuff. Hopelessly conventional, I guess. But we both do things we love. Somewhere along the line I started my own publishing company, Bluejay Books, and then I started working for Tor Books. I've been doing that for more than twenty years. (And hope to keep doing it for many years to come. I just don't really like the idea of retiring--I'm having too much fun working with writers and watching books come out that I helped make better. I can't really complain.

And I really owe it all to the SF Forum. Having to wrestle with the bureaucracies on campus was tremendous training for working in business, and I have no doubt that it was the single most valuable thing I learned here. Yes, I had some great English lit courses, and some wonderful teachers, but the Forum was really where my heart was in school here. And, even after all these years, I still feel that you, those who were there at the start, and everyone I've known in the times I've come back for one thing or another, everybody who helps make this the longest running club in the history of the school, are all like my family.

So I'd have to say that even though starting the Forum scared the shit out of me, it was worth it. It really was a great thing to do, and I don't regret it for one moment. Hell, I really did great things in college, and I don't regret it for one moment.

regret a moment of it. Not even the first week of summer school in 1969, when I actually slept on a cot in the Library in Henry basement because I didn't yet have a room for the summer. But it was close. (And hot, and badly ventilated. And the books kept staring at me . . .)

But up till now, I've left out something really important. The thing that all my political activism and science fiction had in common is something that I think is very important for our country and the world. I'm talking about idealism. It's what attracted me to science fiction in the first place, and it's what made me become politically active, and keeps me that way. Idealism has always been an important component of science fiction, and those who love it.

I believe in the things that not only we, but people all over the world have often felt is characteristically American. Things like being fair in the way we deal with people and nations; and standing up for the ideals in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. I'm not going to say that our history has always been spotlessly clean when it comes to these things. But when it hasn't, we've tried to make things better after we have a bit of nastiness like the eight years of the Bush Crime Family and other less-than-honorable periods in our history. But we strive. And I know from personal experience that people all over the world have hope in the future because of the hope of the United States. I can stay optimistic because I've traveled to see all the great things and I don't

especially just before the election. And people wherever I went were overwhelmingly for Obama, because he represented, to them, the best in the U.S. Not the worst. And that's what we all fight for. And that's one of the things that I love about science fiction, too.

Science Fiction, it has been said by some, is a peculiarly American kind of literature. I won't argue whether that's entirely true, and there's no question that writers of other countries, especially a number from the British Isles, have been hugely important to SF. But what I'm talking about here is the fact that there's idealism in science fiction. Yes, there have been, and probably always will be some very downbeat sf. But the downbeat SF, while it can be depressing, is trying to make a point, to show that in a given scenario, a possible future or alternate reality, things are terrible because they're too much like they are in the time when they were written. In other words, "Get off your butts, or if this goes on, this is your future,":

And an awful lot of it is optimistic, and idealistic, focused on people trying to solve problems, to do the right thing, to make the world better. When SF was experiencing its "New Wave" in the 1960s, a lot of stories and novels were focused on the deep fundamental problems we faced—and still face—as a nation and as a planet: The threat of nuclear holocaust; the specter of overpopulation; the horrible despoiling of the environment, sexism and other forms of discrimination and divisiveness.

When it was very difficult to write about things like totalitarianism in the fifties because Joe McCarthy's nasty committee was trying to root out all the communists supposedly hiding under our beds, science fiction writers were writing stories about politically charged topics . . . but they weren't considered to be subversive, because they were writing about not the U.S. or our world, but perhaps about aliens, or about other worlds, or the far future. It is very like the magic realism movement that developed in South America in countries ruled by despots. The reality in stories by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other magic realists wasn't the same reality as the one under which free expression was crushed. It was a different reality. That was their story, and they were sticking to it, if you know what I mean.

What I'm saying is that science fiction, always a literature of ideas, is not just for escape. You can love science fiction and still embrace reality. Be engaged, be aware. Don't let politics and politicians make you feel powerless. Nothing has ever made me better understand how empowered people can be than my experience of starting and being part of the Stony Brook Science Fiction Forum. We started something from scratch, and it's still going strong, forty years later. Not because of me, but because of all of you, and the others in between my time and now, who worked together to keep it going. It's a lot like keeping the good things in the world going. People in the world don't want to keep you

safe, but they have to take away your rights in order to do so are not your friends. Some will tell you that government can't do anything, or that the government is just plain bad. Yes, the government can do bad things, as we've seen all too clearly recently. But only if we let it.

The old saying is true: The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. And the first step to freedom is knowing what is going on. So read science fiction; read fantasy. Keep faith with your fellows in the Forum, past, present and future.

When I was working on the *Statesman*, the editorial staff changed the motto of the paper—I think this was in 1967 or maybe 1868-- from the school motto “Let Each Become What He is Capable of Being” to “Let Each Become Aware.” Those are still good words to live by. And there's no question in my mind that the people in this room, and the members of the Forum before you, have all, in some ways, helped each other to become more aware. We just had an enormously important election, and have a chance to step back from the brink—of global warming that is irreversible; of toxic environmental destruction; of other policies that have brought us perilously close to depleting the fossil fuels that it took aeons to create. The number of crises we've managed to create for ourselves out of greed, shortsightedness and hatred and fear of the other boggles the mind; but now we have a chance, with a new, saner administration going. People keep telling you that they want to keep self

But it's going to take more than just Barack Obama to make that happen. So if you –any and all of you—will just do a little bit, whether it's blogging about things that matter to you, or writing to your representatives in government, or working on campaigns, or donating money to good causes, or even just something as simple as recycling, and being as green as you can, whatever—we can keep this thing going. Not just the Science Fiction Forum, but the world.

Sorry. I know I've started to sound sappy, so I'd better quit while I'm not too far behind. Live long and Prosper, as they used to say on Star Trek, but even more, never give up; never surrender. That spirit, that idealism, is really what I think is the backbone of the club, and of a lot of good in the country altogether. Now that we're lurching back toward democracy, I think there's real hope for the future. And isn't the future what we at the Forum are all about?

Thanks so much for inviting me. I hope it's been as much fun for all of you as it's been for me. And I hope we can all do this again in another ten years!

Jim Frenkel

Founder

Stony Brook Science Fiction Forum

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administration, to help keep the human race from destroying itself.