

## The January 2009 Opening Ceremony for the International Year of Astronomy

BY ANNEMARIE PICKERSGILL



*Annemarie Pickersgill at l'Observatoire de Paris*

This past January the Opening Ceremony of the International Year of Astronomy was held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France. As a part of the international and youth-centred atmosphere of IYA students from every participating country were invited to attend, and I was one of the lucky two who were chosen to represent Canada.



*IYA Paris 2009 Launch - Betty Hesser, Annemarie Pickersgill, Deanna Pineau, Robert Wilson*

The Opening Ceremony was a two-day conference-style event encompassing a wide range of talks from Robert W. Wilson and the discovery of CMB to Kevin Govender and how astronomy is helping school children in Africa become inspired to better education and attracted to the sciences.

We also had the chance to chat with people, like Wilson, Jocelyn Bell Burnell, and Michel G. Mayor during breaks and at the receptions which were held each evening. It was terrifically exciting to chat with people who have made and are making such enormous contributions to astronomy and the world as a whole. It was unbelievably inspiring to chat with people I've learned about in school and to see just how far a person can go in physics and astronomy with the right level of motivation, and sometimes a little bit of luck.

The absolutely best part of the trip though was meeting so many physics and astronomy students from all over the world. I was initially exceedingly nervous about meeting so many new people in so short a time, but it turns out that it was easy to make over eighty new friends in three days just because we all shared a common interest in the stars.



*Deanna Pineau, Michel G. Mayor, Annemarie Pickersgill*

The prevailing message from the event, both in my experience and in the talks, was that although we may be separated by great distances and differing cultures, astronomy is accessible to all and it can be used as a common factor to bring people together. In fact one of the IYA Special Projects, Star Peace, was created to do just that.

The trip concluded with a guided tour of l'Observatoire de Paris and a great deal more time spent with the other eighty-plus students in attendance.

**Annemarie Pickersgill** is an undergraduate astronomy student specializing between Planetary Science at the University of Waterloo. Annemarie was one of two undergraduate students selected by CASCA and the Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy (ACURA) in a national essay competition to represent Canadian Undergraduates at the IYA ceremonies at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. She can be reached at [apickers@uwo.ca](mailto:apickers@uwo.ca)

For more information about the 2009 International year of Astronomy read the January 2009 CUPJ or visit the IYA websites



*Otilio Garcia Munguia (Mexico), Stacey Kalinikova (New Zealand), Annemarie Pickersgill (Canada), Ania Titei (Romania), Deanna Pineau (Canada), Norberto Gonzalez (Puerto Rico, USA) in front of UNESCO world headquarters, Paris, France Picture Credit: Victor Carbune (Romania)*