



Interview with Barbara Bianchi – recipient of the 2019 Robert Eisenstein Volunteer of the Year Award

Barbara has been a science fair judge for the past eight years. She's also helped with a K-3 classroom math pilot project and an afterschool math tutoring program at Pinon Elementary School. In 2018/2019, Barbara co-lead our classroom experiment project with Doug Lonngren, where she helped to design and implement two science experiments for students in grades 4-5.

How did you first become involved with the Alliance?

After a 20-year teaching career (K-4) in Wisconsin, Arizona and in Santa Fe, I then become an Education Administrator for the New Mexico Department of Education for 10 years. After I retired, I became a science education researcher through the Center for Research in Educational Policy as part of a validation study of the Smithsonian Science Education Center model. I worked in six school districts, including Santa Fe, and observed classrooms with and without the intervention. During that time, I met Bob Eisenstein and attended several Science Café presentations hosted by the Alliance. That's when I first learned about judging science fairs. I got involved because I really wanted elementary school girls to see a female who LOVED science. At the time, there were not many female volunteers in the Alliance, like there are today. The 2019/2020 school season will be my 9th year as a volunteer science fair judge; I just love it so much!

What do you think is one of your greatest strengths and how does that help you as an Alliance volunteer?

I'd say my enthusiasm for science and my knowledge of how kids learn has helped me be an effective Alliance volunteer. I have a strong educational background and I'm very excited to be a part of the Alliance, even though I'm not a "real scientist." I really appreciate what the "real scientists" bring to the table. It's really a beautiful balance between educators and scientists. I love learning from other volunteer judges and our conversations.

What are your main science interests?

My main interest is astrophysics. I've taken this class four times through UNM Los Alamos. It's amazing to learn from scientists. The students choose the subjects, from star formation and measuring space to my FAVORITE -understanding the relationship between time and space. I also love animals. I'm currently reading *The Soul of an Octopus*, by naturalist Sy Montgomery. What an opportunity to learn about an alien that lives on this planet!

Has anything surprised you about volunteering with the Alliance?

I was amazed at how many volunteers showed up and how easy it was to volunteer. Bruce Abell did a beautiful job of organizing the science fairs. I was also surprised at how well the scientists were able to relate to the kids and their projects. I was so impressed!

If you could change one thing about STEM education in Santa Fe, what would it be?

I would like to see more emphasis on innovation and creativity. Now that we have the new standards (Next Generation Science Standards), which are very important, I hope we don't lose the opportunity to encourage creativity and innovation among kids. When I was teaching, before the emphasis on standards, I'd ask the kids "What are some things you wonder about?" and that's how I would build my science curriculum.

What do you wish other people knew about the Alliance?

I want anyone who has work experience in STEM or is retired from a STEM field to know that they have a great opportunity to make a difference for kids by getting involved with the Alliance.

What do you want to see next for the Alliance?

I want the Alliance to maintain its wonderful resource of scientists. What a unique opportunity we have with so many retired scientists in Santa Fe! I also want to think of ways where our volunteers can play an even stronger role in advancing STEM learning for Santa Fe youth.

Tell me a bit about your other volunteer work in Santa Fe?

I recently attended the water summit, which was organized by the Green Chamber in Santa Fe and I volunteer with Math Amigos as a coach/presenter for grade 3-4 classrooms.

Anything else you would like to share?

Teachers work really, really hard. Celebrating successes with our teachers is important and they deserve recognition for their efforts. When teachers learn things through their association with groups like the Alliance, it's important to celebrate their successes.