The OSA Foundation
Two Years Old and Going Strong

Melissa Norr

In the two years since its inception, the OSA Foundation has granted more than $50,000 to programs in schools, developing countries and various special projects. The Society’s philanthropic arm was created in 2002 to help further the organization’s mission of promoting the generation, archiving and dissemination of optics and photonics knowledge worldwide.

The Foundation has helped students travel the world for conferences and other educational opportunities, and it has paid for the translation of the “Optics for Kids” Web site into Spanish, among other projects.

“I am so pleased that the Foundation has been able to make real progress in providing individuals with access to conferences, information and services that might not otherwise have been available,” said Gary Bjorklund, chair of the OSA Foundation Board of Directors.

This year, two of the Foundation’s biggest initiatives have been the International Student Travel Grant program and the Youth Science Education Activity Grants for Local Sections.

To date, the International Student Travel Grant program has paid for more than 30 students from around the world to attend OSA-sponsored conferences.

“I received a grant to attend CLEO 2004, which enabled me to present my research in front of the scientific community and get valuable feedback,” said Greece’s Charu Kakkar, who attends the Indian Institute of Technology.

“Attending this conference has also helped me know first hand the latest developments in the field of photonics.”

Through the Youth Science Education Activity Grant, local sections can apply for financial assistance. Recipients are chosen by the Member and Education Services Council. Each grant is for $1,000. The grants support science fairs, workshops and lectures for students and teachers. They also fund the “Optics Suitcase” program, which brings hands-on optics and photonics materials into classrooms. The suitcases include reusable items for presentations on color and light, as well as packets for children to take home which include liquid crystal paper, diffraction gratings and polarizers.

The Rochester Local Section sends the suitcase free of charge to any organization that requests one, so long as that organization identifies how the suitcase will be used in presentations to young people. The Rochester group has sent suitcases to Colombia, Malawi and the United Kingdom, among other destinations.

“The Optics Suitcase you provided gave some great visuals, and the kids were anxious to take them home to show their families the neat things they learned about,” said Ray Huff of the Laboratory of Laser Energetics at the University of Rochester. Huff made an optics presentation to a local second-grade class in June. “It was great to see the excitement in the kids’ faces.”

OSA’s New England Section used a project grant from the Foundation to help support six regional science fairs in Massachusetts. Through support from the section, a local student was able to attend the International Science and Engineering Fair in Oregon earlier this year.

About 10 percent of Massachusetts science fair projects are optics or photonics related each year, said John Crawford, president of the New England Section. By sponsoring the regional science fairs, the New England Section hoped to raise the number of projects related to optics and to increase knowledge of the optical sciences as a career option, he said.

The Foundation also serves as the custodian of a donor-requested endowment. The “Goodman Book Writing Prize” was endowed for $55,500 by Joseph and Hon Mai Goodman. The
award, given for the “most influential book on optics,” is designed to encourage and recognize quality writing on subjects pertaining to optics. Plans are underway with OSA and SPIE for the administration of this bi-yearly $5,000 prize.

The Foundation also will be launching two new programs in 2005. The Teacher Resource Pack is being created to provide teachers with tools to help bring optics into more classrooms, including the “Optics Discovery Kit” and a laser technology video. These kits contain optical fiber, a flexible mirror, lenses, color filters, a hologram, polarizers and experiment cards. The materials will be available in English, Spanish, German and French.

The new Youth Science Education Activity grants for OSA’s student chapters will help chapters bring optics-related outreach programs into local schools in their regions. This program will be very similar to its local section counterpart. Each grant will be for $500.

OSA continues to seek out projects that will help fulfill the Foundation’s mission. Organizers have considered sponsoring a student exchange program, for example, which would allow American students to study in foreign countries.

The Annual Fund has been established as a vehicle to help OSA members support the Foundation’s objectives. To learn more about the OSA Foundation or how to donate, visit www.osa-foundation.org.

The OSA Foundation is exempt from U.S. federal income taxes under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and is a public charity, therefore gifts to the OSA Foundation are income tax deductible.

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