Q&A Stacey Habergham

The manager of the National Schools' Observatory discusses her experiences on the RAS Council and urges more Fellows to consider standing for election.

What drew you to astronomy?
I have always loved space and, like most children, I went through the phase of wanting to be an astronaut – but I never really let go of that dream! I wasn't aware that I could make a living out of learning about space, though. I was the first in the family to go to university and didn't know what to study – I contemplated archaeology before realizing that it was possible to study astrophysics.

What have you achieved on the RAS Council?
I have loved every minute, being part of something that really makes a difference, and being a voice for diversity and early-career researchers. The achievements that stand out most are rewriting the bye-laws and creating a code of conduct for members, becoming diversity champion for the RAS, taking on the chair of the diversity committee (CDAG) and making the RAS Education, Outreach and Diversity Officer a permanent position. And watching the RAS200 project develop over the last three years has been amazing.

"I hope that the biggest change will be in the culture of our departments"

What advice do you have for new Council members?
Ensure you commit to it: read all the notes prior to meetings and be prepared for what is going to come up and, most of all, speak up and express your opinion. At first I was quiet and a little scared of the experienced people sitting around me, and the grandeur of the room, but I soon realized that I had to speak up for the people who voted for me.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career?
My family and my partner have always given me support and the confidence to go for things. My fiancé also did his PhD in astrophysics, so he knows what it's like to be in academia. He understands the unorthodox hours I work and ensures that I maintain a healthy work–life balance. He supports me when I stand up for diversity and equality issues, which can be hard. My parents still instill in me that if I put the work in, I can do anything.

What do you enjoy most out of your various roles?
I love the range. One day I can be at a meeting, either for the RAS, the Liverpool Telescope (LT) user groups, the STFC small awards committee or our departmental equality and diversity committee; the next day I can be in a school talking to nine-year-olds about the solar system. I do website development; management duties for the National Schools' Observatory; quality control on LT data before it is sent to NSO users; and content creation for the NSO.

What is your greatest achievement so far?
I am proud that I obtained a permanent position less than two years after my PhD, though I was lucky that a job arose when it did, and I had to make the decision to leave research and move into outreach. This has allowed me to buy a house, get a dog and live the life I want to live. It has allowed me to join committees that make a difference, and to dedicate a lot of time to trying to improve conditions in the field and to encouraging young people to consider STEM. If just one student is inspired by my visits or the work I've created, then it'll all be worth it.

What is your biggest mistake?
Not asking enough questions. I was, and still am, a shy and quiet person. At university I was too scared to ask questions, too scared of being wrong. I wish I had been braver, because asking questions leads to learning so much more – and having the confidence to do this further into your career is vital.

Why should more girls study physics or astronomy?
It's important that these fields get more diverse – not just more girls, but more of everyone! It's about telling young people that they can do what they want, and infusing that confidence in them. And it's about all of us who work in education and industry to create an environment in which we allow that to be true. If we all live by this then one day it will happen.

What are you looking forward to in the next 10 years?
I hope that the biggest change will be in the culture of our departments – that in 10 years everyone will feel welcome and encouraged to pursue physics and astronomy. Scientifically speaking, the discovery of gravitational waves has been incredible and I look forward to seeing where this will take us, especially with the dawn of new telescopes. ●

CONTACT DETAILS
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RAS COUNCIL ELECTIONS
Nominations for Council closed in November. Fellows will receive their invitation to vote in April; the closing dates for voting are 11 May (e-vote) and 12 May (paper). Results will be announced at the AGM on 12 May 2017. http://www.ras.org.uk/about-the-ras/council