

# Q&A Steven Gray



The RAS Fellow and owner of a mobile planetarium explains how he has engaged with the RAS 200 project.



**How did your Cosmos Planetarium come about?**

My friend – now business partner – James and I had been doing astronomy outreach for years at our kids’ school. In 2012, we did a *BBC Stargazing Live* event at the school but struggled to book a mobile planetarium. It turned out to be an amazing success, with more than 300 families attending. Like all the best ideas, Cosmos came about over several pints in the pub; James, like me, had come to the conclusion that owning a planetarium would be a great way to take our passion for astronomy outreach to the next level.

**How did you get involved with RAS 200: Sky & Earth?**

In November 2014, I attended an RAS200 “town hall” meeting where I met Ruth MacLennan, manager at the charity Care for Carers. She mentioned that they took carers on respite breaks and wanted to expand to include astronomy; James and I were already offering astronomy and planetarium breaks on the Isle of Coll in the Inner Hebrides. A few months later, Ruth told me they had been shortlisted for RAS200 and I started to think about how I could adapt our breaks to suit carers on respite breaks – I wanted to make sure they were fun and the content easily understandable.

**Has it been a success?**

The feedback has been extremely positive. It works well: when it’s cloudy we are in the planetarium and when it’s clear we are outside observing the Sun, Moon, planets and deep-sky objects. The carers also made and launched bottle rockets, built Mars egg-drop landers, handled meteorites, created impact craters, made sundials, used virtual-reality headsets and more. Some carers have gone on to explore the subject in more detail, some have bought telescopes

or binoculars, and several have been inspired to do astronomy-themed painting and writing. One put together a fantastic photobook about their breaks.

**What’s next for the project?**

We are two years in and I have learnt a lot, but the carers are helping to shape how we take this forward. We will continue with beginners’ content, but we can also expand as we have an amazing group who have already engaged and want more. This year there will be two breaks on the Isle of Coll and one in Linlithgow. I’m putting together more workshops, including telescope making and astrophotography. Care for Carers has also been working with other partners including Dynamic Earth, Edinburgh Royal Observatory, Dumfries & Galloway Forest Park, and Astronomer Royal for Scotland Prof. John Brown – some of whom will provide activities too.

**What have you got out of the experience?**

It has been a privilege to meet and help inspire people who are dealing with difficult, stressful and sometimes complex situations at home every day. Their enthusiasm for learning has been amazing. There is something wonderful about seeing the joy on someone’s face when they look through a telescope and see the surface of a planet for the first time.

**What’s your favourite stargazing site?**

I travel all over the UK to promote dark skies, but there is something special about Coll: the low horizons mean the sky seems bigger. On one visit, we had clear skies on the first night – with the Milky Way shining overhead we could see a storm low on the horizon and there was lightning flashing that lit up the clouds and sea. Just then the ISS did a pass over us. That scene was an incredible sight – the first of many on my visits there.

**What are you looking forward to in the next 10 years?**

With the JWST, E-ELT and other projects just around the corner we are in line for some stunning breakthroughs. There is a real push in the international planetarium community to get these new discoveries out into the public domain. And I’m lucky to be involved in the early stages of a project to build a new science centre in Scotland.

**Do you have any advice for other Fellows?**

With 10 projects running there is a good chance that there is one near you. There are many different ways you could help, from giving basic advice to the charities’ staff organizing projects, to helping to run and organize events for them. Outreach can be very rewarding for all concerned and you will meet some amazing people along the way and, who knows, maybe even change lives for the better. ●

**CONTACT DETAILS**

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**MORE INFORMATION**

RAS 200 website <http://ras200.org>