

## The American Association of Variable Star Observers

The Eighth AAVSO William Tyler Olcott Distinguished Service Award is presented to

### *Dr. Vladimir Strel'nitski*

“for his tireless promotion of astronomy to the public and his keen mentorship of future astronomers through the Maria Mitchell Observatory REU Program.”

While Vladimir came to astronomy rather late in life, as astronomers go, his “revelation” at age 23 sent him down a path that has included virtually all aspects of the profession. He has been an observer, a theoretician, a teacher, a researcher, and finally, a mentor. His broad, deep background makes him an ideal mentor to the astronomers of tomorrow.

Vladimir’s accomplishments include the discovery (from the Kuiper Airborne Observatory) of the first and to date only naturally-occurring laser star, MWC349. He has published over 70 journal articles and numerous paper reviews. Vladimir also obtained a grant to digitize the 8000 plates from 1913 to 1996 in the MMO collection, the first such collection in the world to be fully digitized.

Vladimir’s greatest accomplishment, however, has been the revitalization of the Maria Mitchell Association’s Astronomy Program. When he became Director of the Maria Mitchell Observatory in 1996, there was hardly a working telescope, no usable glass plates, no CCD camera, minimal computer resources, and no funding. He was able to secure private funding for the first year, and he begged and borrowed telescope time from friends and colleagues. He took his first group of students to observe in Arizona, where they gained firsthand experience in operating a telescope and taking CCD data. Based on this success, the National Science Foundation re-instituted the MMO Research Experience in Physics and Astronomy for Undergraduates (REU) program; it is now funded for 5 years at a time. Today, thanks to NSF funding, two computer-controlled research-grade telescopes and CCD cameras have been installed at the MMO Loines and Vestal Street locations, and are used every clear night during the summer.

MMO’s REU program provides students an opportunity for their first publishable research result. The MMO program is intended to give particularly women and minorities research opportunities they might not have otherwise had, so the summer student ratio is typically 2:1 women to men. Special emphasis is placed on students from small colleges that may have math and physics programs but no formal astronomy major. All 72 students under Vladimir’s direction have presented at an AAS meeting, and 60% of them are enrolled in study for or have obtained their Ph.D.

When Vladimir arrived, MMO had become a closed observatory, focused inwardly on research. He revived public outreach at MMO, reinstating open nights at Loines and creating a tour of the Vestal Street site, both led by students. Many of his students will cherish and build on this outreach and public speaking experience. Over 12,000 visitors have come to Loines open nights, and nearly 500 visitors come each year to learn about the solar system, observe sun spots, and learn about the legacy of Maria Mitchell that Vladimir practices: “teach by doing, not by lecturing”.

In recognition of the remarkable transformation of the Maria Mitchell Observatory and the tremendous success of integrating that physical upgrade with its educational and public outreach, it is with great pleasure that the AAVSO awards the William Tyler Olcott Award for 2008 to Dr. Vladimir Strel'nitski.

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Paula Szkody, President

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Arne A. Henden, Director

*Presented at the 97th Annual Meeting  
Nantucket, Massachusetts, October 18, 2008*