An American Planetarian in Italy, 2004

I would like to begin by thanking Jane Sadler and Susan Button for supporting me and suggesting (over several years) that I apply for this wonderful opportunity. I would also like to thank Loris Ramponi for being the wonderful host of this adventure. Without these three dedicated individuals this program would not exist, and without their assistance I would never have known the pleasure of both teaching abroad and discovering Northern Italy from a viewpoint seldom seen by a tourist. Thanks to all.

On Saturday, October 16 my wife, Laura, and I flew from Portland, Maine to Boston then on to Milan. Arriving in Milan on Sunday morning after an all-night flight, we fought jetlag nearly all day as we explored Milan's city center–visiting The Duomo (cathedral) in Piazza del Duomo, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, the Castello Sforzesco castle, and viewing da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Needless to say we were enthralled with our first day in Italy but quite exhausted.

Monday morning we caught a train to Brescia where Loris picked us up at the train station. He quickly whisked us away to the Castello, Brescia's castle, high on a hill overlooking this small Italian city, which turned out to be much larger than we had expected. At the observatory on the castle's grounds we met up with a class of middle-school students. On a patio outside the observatory, I was given a set of 8x10 glossy photographs of common astronomical objects to discuss with the students. I felt a bit nervous but excited to be in this wonderful space. With smiling Italian kids and eager teachers, I had the chance to teach off my head without a lesson plan. That may sound less than desirable, but I actually enjoyed "winging-it," making it up as I went along. The main difficulty was not with impromptu teaching, but rather dealing with the fact that none of these kids spoke any English! The teacher was patient at translating and we quickly developed a rhythm of my explanation followed by her translation. I was curious, however, because at times her translations were much longer than what I said, and sometimes they were much shorter—what was she actually saying?! I guess it was all within reason because the students had numerous questions afterwards and behaved much as middle-school students do in the United States.

This first teaching assignment was over quickly, leaving me with much to think about regarding the coming four days of lessons in the Starlab. Would the high school students have a better command of English? Should I try to quickly learn some basic astronomical terms in *Italiano*? Would my lesson plan be too long? Would I talk too fast? Questions, questions, questions. Yet I had a great time with those kids and Loris seemed pleased, so I felt good about the talk.

That afternoon, Loris took Laura and me to the Serafino Zani Observatory in the mountains north of the town of Lumezzane. What a wonderful location for star parties and observing. We hoped to do just that on Tuesday night, but as luck would have it the skies were overcast all week long.

Tuesday through Thursday I presented planetarium shows at a high school called *Liceo scientifico Calini di via Montesuello* in Brescia. Loris and I arrived Tuesday morning and set up the Starlab in an empty basement room. In the Starlab, I used the northern hemisphere star

cylinder, the coordinates cylinder, and the galaxy portion of the solar system/galactic cylinder. I also brought a tray of slides. My presentation began with an introductory slide show on my work and life as a planetarium operator in Maine. The lesson then concentrated on various methods of finding sky objects, including the altitude-azimuth system, right ascension and declination, and constellations. Along the way, we covered sky phenomena such as the Sun, aurora, visible planets, and the Milky Way. Each presentation also offered two Native American sky legends, which I illustrated with Kodalith line drawings.

The students were wonderful. All my fears of language problems quickly fell away. They understood my English just fine. I consciously tried to speak slowly and enunciate clearly and they seemed to follow along. Each group had a handful of questions, some about the material covered but most about me, where I'm from, and what I do. The stories were received enthusiastically. It was easy to gauge their comprehension by their simple reactions to the storyline. They laughed at all the appropriate times and seemed engaged with the content. The Kodalith line drawings were a definite hit. I had several teachers and students tell me that the pictures helped them to follow the story and the images reinforced their language comprehension.

The three mornings spent at *Liceo scientifico Calini di via Montesuello* were engaging and fun. The students were well prepared and interested. Only a few of them had ever been in a Starlab before and they were all intrigued by the portable planetarium. Just like students in the United States, they found crawling in and out of the dome a curious novelty. Yet once inside and settled they were focused on the lesson. They made me feel like a welcome guest in their school and I trust I made them feel welcomed in the dome.

Thursday afternoon Loris took Laura and me back up to Lumezzane to that town's fixed dome planetarium where we presented a teacher workshop. Loris has this planetarium configured to work with either its own original Italian-made star projector or a Starlab star projector. The planetarium is roughly 4.5 meters in diameter, has a beautiful plaster dome, and loose chairs for seating 25-30 people. Unfortunately there was another mandatory workshop for area teachers scheduled that day, which kept attendance low. We only had six people show up and they spoke little or no English, thus requiring Loris to translate. I showed them my introduction slides and walked through the lesson that I presented to students all week. We also discussed several other Starlab cylinders and talked about skylore. The presentation could definitely have been more effective with a larger group, yet given the intimacy of the small group I was able to address everyone's inquiries.

On Friday morning we moved to a new school, *Liceo scientifico Leonardo di via Balestrieri,* on the south side of Brescia. This proved to be the biggest challenge of the week. Since this school had no space to set up the Starlab, we presented what Loris calls the *Magic Walls*. The room we set up in was a foreign language lab complete with built-in desks wired with tape recorders and headphones. Instead of my usual dome, I had to present my show in the corner of this room, using two walls and an irregular ceiling as my projection area! To add to the challenge, the walls had posters held in place with screws that could not be removed. So while Loris and Laura blacked out the windows, I set up the projectors and equipment. We placed chairs in short, tight rows. At this point, I had doubts about how magical I could make these

walls. Luckily, Loris and Laura were successful at making the room reasonably dark and I was able to maneuver the star projector so that at least one constellation at a time showed up clearly on the walls between the posters. The students were game for the presentation but never achieved the same level of involvement as kids typically do in the Starlab. Nevertheless, the kids were kind, listened attentively, and asked numerous questions after each presentation. Clearly, the *Magic Walls* concept would work better with empty walls, a flat ceiling, and a more open room—given the circumstances we were reasonably successful. I admire Loris' patience and his intense desire to teach astronomy that led to developing *Magic Walls* and working in such unpredictable environments.

Friday evening was my final presentation, a public show at the Lumezzane Planetarium. Loris requested that the focus of this show be Native American skylore—one of my favorite subjects. I made this presentation a live storytelling show, illustrating the stories with a few Kodalith slides and pointing out appropriate constellations. We had about twenty-five people show up, including three young women from a public observatory in Genoa, more than three hours away! The audience was very welcoming. While a few spoke English well, most of the audience understood only bits and pieces. Luckily, we had an excellent translator, Lucia Pedersoli. She had previously read these stories and as an accomplished storyteller herself, we were presented the stories clearly in both English and Italian.

For this show I brought a few extra peripherals—a cassette tape of intro-music, a strobe effect, and a shadow projector. Loris' planetarium assistant, Enrico Loda, was helpful with showing me the planetarium's operating controls and getting my equipment set up.

After Loris gave a brief introduction, I began the show. Telling stories for immediate verbal translation presented challenges that I hadn't anticipated. The flow certainly changes, as after every few moments I had to stop for Lucia to translate. While this was distracting for me at first, within a few minutes Lucia and I developed our own rhythm so it flowed smoothly. When I tell these stories at home I tend to use character voices. Here I found they complicated the comprehension level so I dropped the "funny voices". After the presentation we spent more than twenty minutes with questions and discussions regarding sky mythology, storytelling techniques, and night sky phenomena. What a wonderful way to end my teaching experience in Italy—an engaged and delightful audience!

Meanwhile, throughout the week Laura and I were able to indulge ourselves in exploring Brescia, Verona, Sirmione, Lake Garda, and on the final weekend, Venice. The food was incredible, the people were welcoming and patient with our crude Italian, and the art, architecture, landscapes, and history never failed to hold our attention. While the trains and buses were a good means of moving about on our own, I'm glad Loris drove us to the schools. I would need a healthy dose of adrenaline to take on driving in Italian cities—wow!

This was an incredible week of teaching, learning, meeting new friends and colleagues, and widening of our cultural horizons. I would highly recommend this to my fellow planetarians. Since the opportunity has so many positive aspects for both the students in Brescia and the visiting educator, it's hard to see any reason not to do this. I can't believe it took me so many years to apply for this opportunity. Loris is a most capable host, full of enthusiasm for

teaching astronomy and ready to assist in any way. Thank you, Loris, for all that you did for Laura and me. I respect you as a talented colleague and think of you as a fine new friend. Thanks should also go to Loris' assistants Enrico and Lucia, and to all the teachers who willingly did so much to prepare their students for my presentations.

Finally, I would like to finish by thanking those who make this yearly educational adventure possible: Learning Technologies, Inc. of Somerville, Massachusetts, the International Planetarium Society Mobile Planetarium Committee, and the Serafino Zani Astronomical Observatory of Lumezzane, Italy. What you offer is a great opportunity for all involved. Thank you.

--John T. Meader