Greetings from the Griffith Observatory Satellite
Latest update on the next planetarium show, Signs of Life

By Bob Niemack

I joined the Signs of Life team as Producer in February of this year, so this is my first “update” on the project to you, Friends Of The Observatory members. I know many of you, but for those of you who don’t know me, my history with Griffith Observatory goes back to my youth in the ‘60s, sitting on the hard wooden seats of the planetarium. Then, as an adult, I had the pleasure of directing The Once and Future Griffith Observatory, which screens daily in the Leonard Nimoy Event Horizon theater. Now I’m honored to work on the production of Signs of Life for the Samuel Oschin Planetarium.

We are excited to begin the production stage of Signs of Life after two years of developmental work on both the show and the production studio. That means that we’ve finalized the script and have “locked in” the blueprint to make the show. The team now begins the highly meticulous and creative task of modeling, texturing, and look-developing roughly 250 computer-generated assets using a variety of 2D and 3D software. To that end we have added eight new workstations at the Satellite in anticipation of growing the team of visual artists who will animate, light, and render each of the 50 shots that make up our show.

Our team’s home away from home is located in a nondescript building in eastern Griffith Park, The Griffith Observatory Satellite. Attached to our building is a smaller building that we affectionately call the “Mini-Moon.”

It hums 24/7 with electricity and an ample supply of air conditioning to house our render farm. “Render farm” is a homey term for the infrastructure that is made up of computers, cables, servers, and digital storage. It takes an incredible amount of machine power to turn our artists’ work into beautifully rendered computer-generated images that will knock your socks off on the dome in the Samuel Oschin Planetarium come 2020!

We are steadily and selectively building our tight-knit team of talented and dedicated artists and technical staff to begin generating the rendered frames that will constitute the show. Our artistic team is led by seasoned Art Director and show Co-Director, Don Dixon. Among those to recently join our team are: Benjamin Roudenis, Show Production Technology Administrator; Erik Zimmermann, FX Lead; Jared Brodell, Computer Graphics (CG) Generalist; O’Neal Douglin, Render Wrangler; and Eric Keller, CG Generalist.

Left to right: Fred Kolouch, Tom Bradley, Estevan Guzman, Carolyn Manning, O’Neal Douglin, Dawn Fidrick, Matthew Burlando, Jared Brodell, Gee Yeung, Bob Niemack, Patrick So, Chris Butler, Erik Zimmermann, Benjamin Roudenis, Don Dixon

The mini-dome shown above is meant to replicate the experience for the artistic team of sitting in the Samuel Oschin Planetarium on a smaller scale.
FOTO Members are up to the L.K. Whittier Challenge

A BIG THANK YOU TO ALL FOTO SUPPORTERS who stepped up and gave to our L.K. Whittier Foundation challenge grant announced late last November.

The L.K. Whittier Foundation generously offered $500,000 towards the production of Signs of Life – but in order to get the grant, we needed to match it with other gifts. Over 150 of you, both individuals and foundations, stepped up within three months to give us donations that ranged from $10 to $66,667 (Goldhirsh Foundation – part of a $200,000 total gift) – ALL of which were worth double the value with the Whittier one-for-one challenge grant.

We were very happy to send a letter to Christine Thompson at the L.K. Whittier Foundation on February 16, 2018, along with a list of all donors, letting them know that FOTO met the challenge grant objective. We received our $500,000 within a few days.

FOTO has some of the best and most loyal members in the city of Los Angeles.

THANKS FOR BEING THERE WHEN WE NEEDED YOU!

Vanguard Society Continues Solid Support for Signs of Life

As production on Signs of Life progresses, FOTO is extremely pleased to report that renewals from the Vanguard Society were at 100% for 2017, the second year in a row this has happened! As most of you know, the Vanguard Society is a special leadership community of donors who are specifically focused on the new planetarium show which premieres in May of 2020. Vanguard’s gift level at $5,000 minimum entitles the members to special evenings of viewing rough-cuts, opportunities to meet the animators, and invitations and recognition tied to the premiere party of Signs of Life.

Vanguard Society’s most recent gathering was in May 2018 at the Satellite animation studio for a behind-the-scenes tour.

If you are interested in exploring the benefits of being part of this select group of supporters, please get in touch with Bonnie Winings, bwinings@foto.org.
Along with expanding our team, we are also growing the capacity of our render farm by a factor of three. The machine hardware that calculates and processes the digital images are called render blades. They will be installed by our technical team with support from GPL Technologies (the fact that they are “GPL” and that we often consult with “JPL” has caused at least a few instances of hilarious miscommunication thus far).

Since this show is being produced for Griffith Observatory, it is seen as a prestigious opportunity for the visual effects and computer science communities to gain a high level of brand exposure. As a result, our team, through the efforts of Dawn Fidrick, Co-Producer, and Gee Yeung, CG Supervisor, has been able to garner relationships that have yielded a number of valuable in-kind donations from various companies.

One of our most enthusiastic supporters is Autodesk. Software developer Autodesk has been a big contributor to our creative pipeline. Autodesk has gifted us licenses of their premier industry standard 3D software Maya, their production tracking, review and pipeline tool Shotgun, and the Arnold renderer.

With the help of a solid creative team, excellent software support, and the latest in computer graphics hardware, we are on our way to producing a visual tour de force for the Samuel Oschin Planetarium.
As most FOTO members may already know, CAMILLE LOMBARDO, FOTO’S Executive Director, retired at the end of June this year. To merely say she will be missed or that she has been a critical FOTO leader for her 24-year career here is to understate her many contributions and her importance to FOTO and to Griffith Observatory.

Camille will not be leaving us entirely. She will stay on in a part-time consulting role, helping FOTO deliver the new Samuel Oschin Planetarium show, Signs of Life, for its 2020 anticipated opening, and — as requested — helping our new Executive Director to transition into the role.

Camille has been contemplating retirement for some time, and gave the FOTO Board ample notice of her intentions to retire mid-year. This allowed the Board to engage in a thorough and disciplined search for a new Executive Director, considering both internal and external candidates.

Our new Executive Director has been hired, and officially began her tenure in early July. Her name is Ann Marie Bedtke, and for the last six years she has been the Executive Director of a significant southern California charitable foundation, the Los Angeles County Bar Association’s Counsel for Justice. We will formally introduce Ann Marie to FOTO members in the near future.

Ann Marie will be a great addition, and she will be joining a strong organization with many assets: our FOTO staff is competent and experienced; our membership is active and enthusiastic; our relationship with Griffith Observatory is superb; and our link to the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks is excellent. Our mission of supporting Griffith Observatory to remain a world-class institution is clear, and our consistent ability to execute that mission is proven. The FOTO Board is very aware of how important Camille has been, and appreciative. While we know that no one can replace her, we are confident that FOTO will continue to move forward with Ann Marie as her successor.

As a FOTO Board Member for the last six years and as President for the last two and a half years, I have had a front-row seat to observe Camille’s many contributions and to understand in some detail her deep commitment to FOTO and her broad impact on Griffith Observatory.

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Who would have predicted what a great experience Camille would begin back in 1994 when she left her successful career in bank marketing management, to fill the vacant Executive Director job at FOTO? Her lifelong interest in astronomy and love for the Observatory had led her to volunteer service on the FOTO Board. Who would have expected her to not only step into the full-time role of running FOTO, but for her to be a veritable force of nature, shepherding FOTO into what is often described as Los Angeles’s most successful and effective public-private partnership and helping propel Griffith Observatory into one of the most visited, respected, and important institutions in Los Angeles, in California, in the USA, and throughout the world. The right word is “amazing.”

Camille’s many accomplishments, large and small, would fill a book, as would the various stories of her unique leadership style, her love of all things astronomical, and her love of generations of FOTO members and visitors.

Any review of her major accomplishments has to start with the Griffith Observatory renovation and expansion, completed in 2006. When Camille, Dr. E.C. Krupp, Director of Griffith Observatory, and Mark Pine, then on the FOTO Staff, but now Deputy Director of Griffith Observatory, began work to implement the audacious plan of a much-needed renovation and expansion of the Observatory, who would have believed they could pull it off? It was an incredibly complex architectural and engineering challenge — to keep faith with the iconic Observatory building while expanding its space and creating room for a host of new exhibits that could entertain and inspire the imaginations of millions of new visitors. But to make it succeed would also take untold time and effort to build support in the community, in the Department of Recreation and Parks, in the Los Angeles City Council, in the scientific community, in Los Angeles’s ever-prominent entertainment community, in the donor community, and even in the U.S. House and Senate. Camille led the effort, tirelessly helping raise much of the $93-million cost of the project; participating in management of the architectural, engineering, construction, and exhibit creation. Camille planned – and in many respects managed – the many details needed to pull off a multi-year and multi-faceted construction effort.

Among her other accomplishments, Camille was instrumental in the production of our reopening planetarium show, Centered in the Universe, which has been presented continuously since the renovated Griffith Observatory reopened in 2006. The show has now been seen by some 2.6 million people!
As with the renovation itself, Camille was involved in all aspects of that show, and the result was spectacular. Camille was also instrumental in FOTO taking over funding responsibility for the fifth-grade school program and bus scholarships, which provide 27,500 Los Angeles school kids each year with a fantastic learning experience through a structured visit to Griffith Observatory – starting generations of children on a life-long learning experience in the wonders of science and astronomy.

More recently, Camille led the efforts and the fundraising to upgrade the Samuel Oschin Planetarium with new, state-of-the-art digital video projectors and a new sound system. This was followed by her work on development of the all-new show, Signs of Life, which will take full advantage of the new planetarium technology and lead the way into the next decade of spectacular planetarium shows, entertaining and inspiring generations to come. Camille has again served as one of the executive producers of the show and has influenced all aspects of the production – which will open in 2020. I can personally attest to the amount of work and contribution Camille has made to this show, and will continue to make in her post-retirement, part-time consulting role.

We can see the accomplished hand of Camille Lombardo in a host of endeavors brought to fruition by her efforts and vision: fundraising for new projects or particular needs to keep Griffith Observatory special, developing and supporting our scientific lecture series, introducing the scientists who make these lectures entertaining and informative, leading FOTO member tours of the famous Mt. Wilson telescopes, or – her real labor of love – leading FOTO-member expeditions to exotic locales around the world to see the most striking astronomical events including total eclipses of the Sun, and in hundreds of other and smaller ways over the last quarter century. No task was too complex for Camille, and no task too mundane to get her full attention if it was important to the future of Griffith Observatory – just witness her dogged contributions to making the 2017/18 traffic plan work for everyone.

In the end, all I can say to Camille is:

Thank you, from all of us, for 24 years of extraordinary effort and significant accomplishment. You will be missed.

We will all get a chance to hear some of these stories when FOTO hosts a special event this fall honoring Camille for her 24 years of service. We are planning to honor Camille and her career at Griffith Observatory on the evening of November 5, 2018. Details are still under discussion as we work to include various dignitaries who wish to honor Camille for her contributions to Los Angeles and southern California. All FOTO members and supporters are encouraged to attend. PLEASE SAVE THE DATE, NOVEMBER 5TH, AND LOOK FOR A MORE DETAILED INVITATION LATER IN THE SUMMER.

Richard Semler
President
FOTO Board of Directors

Please Welcome Our New Board Member!

We are delighted to introduce you to our new FOTO Board member, CHRISTINE SARKISSOF. Christine is the Managing Director and Regional Director of the Los Angeles North Private Bank of Union Bank, where she leads a team of wealth professionals dedicated to the financial needs of high net worth individuals, non-profit organizations, business owners, corporate executives, and professional services firms.

Active in the community, Christine has served on various boards. Her board involvement has included the Executive Board of Directors for the Boys and Girls Club of Hollywood, the American Heart Association, AHA Go Red for Women Executive Leadership Team, the Circle of Care Foundation at the Sherman Oaks Hospital, the Studio City Chamber of Commerce, and Peace Over Violence. She volunteers with Junior Achievement Finance Park, APLA (Project Angel Food), and various Habitat for Humanity Builds, including Power Women With Power Tools.

I’m excited at the opportunity to join the FOTO Board of Directors in their continued effort to further public science education. I want to help bring that to the next generation and beyond as we continue to support this iconic institution. I’m especially passionate about the school field trip program and how it inspires so many kids. I remember as a young girl visiting Griffith Observatory with my school, on a similar field trip, and want every child to have the same experience and opportunity.

Please join us in welcoming Christine to our Board
INCE 1935, people have come to Griffith Observatory for a range of reasons. When the building first opened, people probably came out of curiosity, for most had never seen such a place. The Observatory’s planetarium was the third of its kind in the U.S., and the Zeiss projector in the middle of the room looked like a praying mantis. Over the years, more and more people came to the building, with over 1.6 million visitors in 2017 alone. Whether for the building features, spectacular views, amazing architecture, or even by accident (“What’s that big white building?”), exploring why people visit Griffith Observatory provides insight into its place in our city.

Many people come because the sky, even with all the light pollution and haze, beckons them. We’re not an observatory for nothing! Free public telescope viewing has always been one of the main attractions. It is little wonder the two main public instruments – the Zeiss 12-inch refracting telescope and the triple-beam coelostat solar telescope – are the most looked-through of their kind on the planet. There are also telescopes on the lawn nightly, not to mention the monthly gathering of dozens of telescopes for the Public Star Party.

Occasionally, the sky does something that warrants special attention. That was the case on January 31, 2018, when several thousand people got out of bed VERY early (4:00 a.m.) to come and watch the total lunar eclipse together. That last word is the most operative, because a lunar eclipse can be safely viewed from anywhere. Many of those coming to Observatory events seem to be there for a shared experience. It was a very pleasant morning, with a clear sky and a great spirit among the crowds of observers.

In recent years, that shared experience has happened online in addition to on lawn. Thanks to the purchase of equipment by FOTO, Dr. Laura Danly and her team have established the Observatory as the “go-to” destination for high-quality live broadcasts of astronomical events. The broadcasts are a mix of interesting commentary, warm humor, fantastic planetarium show music, and of course, the amazing real-time astronomical visuals. This January’s lunar eclipse drew the most viewers so far, with nearly a million people watching live on our YouTube and Livestream channels. Over 100 million people saw a portion of our live broadcast via NASA.gov, Space.com, the Weather Channel app, and others. The event and the live broadcast were also covered as a news story by Good Morning America, BBC News, CBS News, and most of the local Los Angeles stations. Our time-lapse video of the eclipse, currently featured on the Observatory home page, is the highest quality of its kind.

Sometimes people visit because the Observatory is a notable landmark in the center of Los Angeles. In February, the Observatory hosted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti for a press conference on the roof of the building, with Mt. Hollywood and the Hollywood Sign in the background. A month earlier, Observatory Director E.C. Krupp gave a personal tour to Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, who identified the Observatory as “the one place I must see during my visit.” The Observatory was featured on the City of Los Angeles float in the 2018 Rose Parade, and the image of the iconic building adorns the logos of the Los Feliz Neighborhood Council, the March for Science LA 2018, and the Mayor’s Fund for Los Angeles program.

Some people visit because they’ve read articles or posts that draw them to the building. Griffith Observatory was the first location listed in a Sunset Magazine ranking of “12 Iconic Movie Locations You Can Visit IRL (in real life).” The English newspaper The Daily Mail echoed that perspective with “The Top 20 Locations Used the Most for TV Shows and Movies.” Travel & Leisure ranked the most romantic destinations in each of the 50 states, and Griffith Observatory was the selection
for California. For romances that have progressed, a noted photo and camera company rated the Observatory as one of the top ten best places in the U.S. for engagement photos. The Observatory has recently been featured as part of an ongoing storyline on the popular TV series, *The Big Bang Theory* (Raj is a planetarium lecturer!). TripAdvisor rated the Observatory as number two out of 597 attractions in Los Angeles, behind only the Getty Center.

Finally, part of the story of why people visit is the way they visit. On March 22, we marked the one-year anniversary of the resumption of daily bus service to the Observatory for the first time in several decades. The bus runs between the building and the Vermont/Sunset Metro Red Line station. This connection makes the Observatory easily accessible to downtown, Hollywood, the Valley, and every-where else on the Metro system. As the number of out-of-state and foreign tourists increases steadily, public transportation offers a critical way to help people have their Observatory experience.

Regardless the reason or ride, we are all happy so many people visit. The Observatory is one of L.A.’s civic gathering places. It welcomes all who seek a connection with the sky, the building, and each other.

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**GRiffith Observatory Parking**

The Observatory's public parking lot, public parking on West Observatory Road, and public parking on Western Canyon Road cost $4 per hour and require payment during the following times.

Monday - Friday
12:00 noon - 10:00 p.m.

Monday - Sunday
10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.

On concert days, there is NO public parking in the Greek Theatre area after 1:00 p.m. For more information: www.lagreektheatre.com
Forget the hassle. Take the bus.

✦ Avoid traffic congestion and parking fees
✦ See the best views of the Hollywood Sign
✦ Catch a show in the Samuel Oschin Planetarium or at the Greek Theatre
✦ Access Griffith Park hiking trails
✦ Shop in Los Feliz

For more information to plan your visit:

GriffithObservatory.org
LADOTtransit.org
Metro.net/observatoryshuttle

BUS SERVICE
to Griffith Observatory

EVERY DAY

Connect from Metro’s Red Line
Vermont/Sunset station

Monday - Friday
12:00 noon - 10:00 p.m.
(Griffith Observatory is closed on Mondays.)

Weekend
10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.

Imagine...

- Standing in the shadow of the Moon for 2 minutes and 8 seconds
- A full-day eclipse excursion to La Serena for solar eclipse viewing near center line
- Private use of Tololo Beach Restaurant during eclipse
- Exclusive lectures and excursions with Dr. E.C. Krupp, Director, Griffith Observatory
- Visiting Valparaiso (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Viña del Mar, and the Santa Rita Winery for wine tasting
- A farewell night experience at the Andean Astronomical Observatory
- And more...

For more information or to book your trip, please contact Montrose Travel at 818.553.3200 or visit www.montrosetravel.com/FOTO

QUESTIONS? Contact us at FOTOfriend@FOTO.org or call 213.473.0879.

LOOK UP!
The monthly preview email of Griffith Observatory and FOTO activities.

E-UPDATE
Help us save paper and printing, plus get the convenience of receiving your Update quickly and efficiently!

SEND US AN EMAIL AT: FOTOfriend@FOTO.org