Faculty Giving in Physical Sciences: Bill Parker

Professor Bill Parker wants to pass on some of his serendipity.
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UCI Physical Sciences Communications



Professor Parker wants to create the kinds of conditions that help students in the UCI Department of Physics & Astronomy thrive.

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UCI

Faculty Giving in Physical Sciences

From the hunt for exoplanets and ghostly subatomic particles, to developing chemical devices to advance health, and to research revealing how climate change will unfold around the world, faculty at the UCI School of Physical Sciences have been pioneering scientific discoveries from the early days. Sherry Rowland and Fred Reines, two of our founding professors, received Nobel Prizes in 1995. Reines co-discovered the neutrino — a new elementary particle of nature once thought to be undetectable — and Rowland discovered that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) deplete the

ozone layer, which sparked a triumphant worldwide effort to close the ozone hole. These efforts are emblematic of the broad mission of the School: to uncover fundamental insights, and to provide transformative discoveries that improve the world.

*In addition to our science, there is another tradition among faculty in physical sciences: **philanthropy**. Out of all the faculty members in the school, past and present, over 50% have donated to programs in physical sciences*

*Through this **Faculty Giving in Physical Sciences** series, you will get to know those who donate to the school, and you'll discover why they feel moved to support the mission of the UCI School of Physical Sciences.*

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Professor Bill Parker of the UC Irvine Department of Physics & Astronomy never submitted an application to become a professor at UCI. He didn't even know UCI existed when he first visited the campus back in 1967. At the time he was a physics graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, and he made what he described as a "traditional journey" for soon-to-be Ph.D. recipients who would visit and deliver seminars at universities where they think they might want to apply to work.

He started his West Coast visits at Stanford, and then started working his way south. When he came to Orange County, a friend told him that there was a new university across the Back Bay, so Parker crossed what he remembered was a "rickety bridge," came to a nascent UCI and gave a talk at the newly formed UCI Department of Physics.

"I believe in serendipity," said Parker, whose career in science began with measuring the numerical value of certain fundamental physical constants. "You can't plan your future."

After his talk, and after his Ph.D. advisor at the time called the department to voice his support, Parker received an offer to become a UCI professor.

It was a serendipitous move for UCI, because Parker, in addition to measuring constants like the ratio of electron charge to the Planck constant, was instrumental

in making the University Hills neighborhood on campus a reality. That, and as graduate dean at UCI in the 2000s, Parker worked to bolster support for graduate students so that UCI could compete with grad programs at universities with more well-established academic programs. Later, he established a fund that matched donations of up to $50,000 for the Physics & Astronomy Graduate Fellowship Fund — a goal reached in 2020.

Parker thinks that serendipity is a combination of being in the right place at the right time, and having the know-how to take advantage of being in the right place once you're there. For Parker, creating the kinds of conditions where serendipity can happen for others at UCI Physics & Astronomy is the main reason why he gives to Physical Sciences. Chiefly, he wants to give graduate students in his department the funding they might need in their first year of graduate school.

Parker, alongside his wife, Janice, are two of the most generous Physical Sciences faculty donors, with their money going both to graduate students as well as to the UCI Center for Cosmology. Asked whether he gives any detailed instructions for how researchers should use the funding he gives, Parker said no. The reason, he described, is because he wants to create as much flexibility as possible for current graduate student needs, because, as he'll be the first to tell you, chance can lead things you never could've imagined.

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