

**Oral Testimony: Michelle Nichols-Yehling, Adler Planetarium
September 28, 2017**

On August 21, 2017, millions of people across the United States gathered. Friends, families, and strangers gathered by the hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands in public spaces. They gathered in small groups, or they found places to be alone. No matter the size of the group, the goal was the same: look up at the sky at an astronomical spectacle that hadn't been seen to this degree in this country for several decades: a solar eclipse.

Coordination and planning of efforts for public engagement around the eclipse started several years ago. Organizations such as the American Astronomical Society and the Astronomical Society of the Pacific helped institutions and groups talk to each other to see where efforts could be shared. The American Astronomical Society and NASA served as clearinghouses of reliable scientific content to help the media, the public, and educators engage with the eclipse phenomenon. Universities such as Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and the University of Missouri in Columbia planned extensive public opportunities at many audience engagement levels. Institutions such as the Adler Planetarium in Chicago organized events for those who could not travel to the path of totality but who still wanted to enjoy the sight of the partial eclipse. These were massive efforts that reached millions of people across the country .

The Adler Planetarium started planning for this eclipse three years ago. We had several goals for our programs: increase the capacity of organizations around the Chicago area to host their own eclipse observing events, make residents of Chicago, the surrounding suburbs, and those in the region aware of what was happening and empower them with the skills and tools to observe the eclipse themselves, serve as a trusted source of information for the public and the media, provide eclipse resources for those who might not otherwise have access to them, reach traditionally underserved audiences, engage a variety of communities and get them interested in our Universe, even if they had not been interested previously, and bring Chicago together because this was Chicago's eclipse to share. Our events were free and open to everyone. **[SHOW SLIDE 1]** In addition to our programs in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs, we brought our Galaxy Ride outreach program to over 2,300 people in several rural communities in southern Illinois. **[SHOW SLIDE 2]** We were also honored to be asked by Southern Illinois University to assist them with planning and facilitating several of their eclipse events that garnered national and international attention.

And what were the results these efforts? **[SHOW SLIDE 3]** We distributed, free of charge, over 250,000 safe eclipse viewing glasses, including 10,000 given to schools to help students and teachers in the Chicago area watch the eclipse during the school day. The Chicago Public Library system and libraries throughout the region held eclipse viewing activities at dozens of library branches. Chicago Park District parks held eclipse viewing events. Our partners such as the Chicago Botanic Garden, the Morton Arboretum, Naper Settlement, and WonderWorks Children's Museum held viewing opportunities that welcomed thousands more participants. We empowered people who did not have solar viewing glasses to find safe and easy ways to view the eclipse via other means. **[SHOW SLIDE 4]** The Eclipse Fest block party held at the Adler Planetarium attracted 60,000 people, which is ten times the highest number we ever previously recorded for a sky observing event, and ten percent of our annual attendance.

[SHOW SLIDE 5] The audience at that event was a cross-section of the diverse population of Chicago, including participants who had never interacted with the Adler Planetarium previously.

[SHOW SLIDE 6] We estimate the number of people directly impacted by all of our activities to be over a half million.

The next logical step is to ask, "What's next?" How do we leverage the momentum and excitement from this eclipse to carry us forward? This kind of effort is what out-of-school-time institutions like the Adler Planetarium already do. The Adler Planetarium exists to help people become better connected with the Universe. The public interest in the eclipse allowed us to scale our efforts upward to welcome more people. Illinois responded to us with an enthusiasm that was staggering.

In addition to the collective inspiration provided by the eclipse, the Adler Planetarium hopes this incredible experience will also lead to 1) financial and programmatic support for out-of-school-time institutions to continue providing science activities to the public, 2) support for institutions and organizations to communicate with each other and jointly plan and sustain small and large science programs that have a variety of impacts, and 3) support for institutions to bring high-quality science and engaging science activities, at low or no cost, to underserved populations in urban, suburban, and rural locations. We hold fast to our core belief that making science welcoming, engaging and accessible to ALL helps strengthen communities socially, culturally and economically. **[SHOW SLIDE 7]** After all, we share a sky above our heads, and everyone deserves the opportunity to engage with it.

Thank you.