

Paul E. Anna: High Points

Get Smart

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Ever feel like the smartest guy in the room?

How about the dumbest?

Well, I felt like the latter recently when I attended the Physics Café and then the Aspen Center for Physics lecture series event at the Wheeler Opera House. But rather than being depressed over my deficiencies, I was actually OK with it. After all, everyone was nice, the view out toward the mountain was beautiful, there were complimentary cookies and coffee, and I was learning something. I think.

While science and physics are not my strong suit, I have been intrigued that there is a weekly winter lecture series at the Wheeler sponsored by the Nick DeWolf Foundation. I knew that the Aspen Center for Physics sponsored a world-class summer program, but this was a bit below my radar so I decided to attend Leo Kouwenhoven's talk on "The Search for Majorana Fermions."

If you have never been to one of these DeWolf presentations, I think you'll be amazed. First of all, the turnout was impressive. I can't imagine many folks knew who Kouwenhoven was, but then again maybe I'm wrong. The professor from Delft University of Technology, a school in the Netherlands that is to physics what Alabama is to football, seemed to be a rock star to this crowd as he deftly (or was it Delftly?) took them through the search for particles in the universe that are "mysteriously equal to their anti-bodies." That is to say that the Majorana Fermions have zero charge and zero energy. Something I'm sure we can all relate to at times.

It seems that identifying and finding these chargeless particles has potential applications in the development of quantum computing, which is...well I'm not really sure, but for physicists and those who love them it seems to be a huge thing. Kouwenhoven, who had spent the week in a bed at the St. Regis with the flu (a bed he recommended highly to the infirm), was engaging, descriptive and obviously brilliant as he took the crowd through the particulars of his presentation. It wasn't Robert Randolph at the Belly Up or the Session, but in its own way it was a uniquely Aspen experience, with lots of really smart people engaging in a subject that they were passionate about.

Every Wednesday the crowd begins to gather in the upstairs lobby of the Wheeler at 4:30 for the Physics Café — a casual conversation with guest speakers taking questions from the arriving throng. At 5:30, the lectures begin in the Opera House itself. I would say the Wheeler was about half to two-thirds full for Professor Kouwenhoven's talk, and I would expect there to be even more on Jan. 30 when James Peebles addresses the assembled. His talk on "Seeking Dark Matter" just sounds like a crowd pleaser. There are more Wednesday discussions coming up, including talks on particle physics and astrophysics. Oh my.

You can find out more at www.aspenphysics.org or by contacting the Wheeler, where the nicest people in Aspen work.