Five From UA Attend Hawking Memorial After Humanities Professor Wins Ticket Lottery

College of Humanities
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Two UA faculty members and three students became unlikely attendees of the interment of one of the greatest minds of modern times, Stephen Hawking, after winning tickets to the physicist's funeral in London.

The lottery was organized by the Stephen Hawking Foundation to admit up to 1,000 members of the public to the ceremony.

For the UA delegation, witnessing the renowned physicist's formal service on June 15 was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and a chance to reflect on humanity's pursuit of knowledge.

Ken McAllister’s road to London for Hawking's interment began in mid-May. That's when McAllister, associate dean of research and program innovation in the College of Humanities, saw a news item about daughter Lucy Hawking's plan to offer some tickets to the public through an open submission process.

"I thought it was a curious decision to have a lottery," McAllister said. "It was just a simple online form, and you could apply as an individual or a school. I entered on behalf of the College of Humanities, thinking how great it would be for a group of humanists to attend what I imagined ? wrongly, it turned out ? would be a science-heavy event."

About 25,000 people entered the lottery. News that his entry had won came to McAllister a few weeks later, as he was listening to a lecture. In disbelief, he shared the email with colleagues.

"I thought it might be a hoax at first," he said. "It seemed so unlikely."

The invitation allowed entry for up to five faculty members and students, so McAllister and Judd Ruggill, head of the Department of Public and Applied Humanities, reached out to the Arizona-based Dorrance Family Foundation for help selecting several of their best UA undergraduate Dorrance Scholars. The foundation provides academic and financial support for college students, particularly those who are first-generation college attendees.

Within a few days, three Dorrance Scholars, all from Arizona high schools, were chosen to attend: Carlos Weiler, a chemical and environmental engineering major; Jacob Nathaniel Brown, a psychology major; and Onieda Hudson, a nutritional sciences major. Two of the three would be visiting London for the first time.
"To see a new place in the context of this historic moment was an opportunity to think about science and the humanities— not to mention life and death— and their connection to place," said Ruggill, who also went on the trip.

Weiler, who received the invitation on his birthday, called the trip "incredible."

"Hawking was a person who questioned a lot of things, even his own ideas. He left questions that are still unanswered, and people are trying to answer to gather a better understanding of the cosmos," Weiler said. "It drove home the importance of asking questions."

Hudson said she was awed by the ceremony, its significance and its historic location.

"I am a religious person, so I completely admired and respected Westminster Abbey. It was impactful to not just see the structure itself, but to be involved in a hosted ceremony," she said. "Funerals give family and friends the chance to say goodbye, and religion brings hope that when someone goes, it is not the last time they will see them, which is exactly what gives people the courage to carry on with life."

Hawking's ashes were interred between the graves of two other preeminent scientists, Charles Darwin and Isaac Newton.

After the ceremony, each attendee was given a CD containing music written by Vangelis—a Greek composer known for his work in electronic music—with a recorded message of peace and hope from Hawking himself. The European Space Agency broadcast the music and message into space during the service, beaming the signal toward the one of the closest known black holes, 1A 0620-00, located approximately 3,500 light years away.

"When we see the Earth from space, we see ourselves as a whole; we see the unity and not the divisions. It is such a simple image with a compelling message: one planet, one human race," Hawking said in the message. "We are here together, and we need to live together with tolerance and respect. We must become global citizens."

Hearing this message, delivered in Hawking's distinctive, computerized voice, offered a fitting final lesson from the great scientist, McAllister said.

"That statement spoke to the fact that Hawking himself understood that all the science behind exploring the universe exists because we're trying to understand who we are," he said. "Hawking's work wasn't an abstract undertaking. It was a lifelong exploration of what it means to be human."

A version of this article originally appeared on the UA College of Humanities website.

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