

programme at Kingston played with wind tunnels and microscopes and interviewed astronauts. Sim is also a trustee with the Daphne Jackson Trust, a UK charity that helps scientists who have had a career break to return to research.

Of course, scientists don't always find retirement easy. Nancy Schlossberg thought it would be "a piece of cake". In 1997, at the age of 68, and after 24 years as a counselling psychologist at the University of Maryland in College Park, she became an emerita and headed for Sarasota, Florida. There, she hoped she'd find ways to write or get speaking invitations. But it wasn't that simple. "I get to Sarasota, and there I am without a purpose," she recalls. "I was shocked."

Schlossberg had to create her own opportunities. Because her professional expertise was in life transitions, she decided to study retirement. That work led to the first of three books that she has penned on the topic since 'retiring': *Retire Smart, Retire Happy* (American Psychological Association, 2003).

Through her post-retirement research, Schlossberg has worked out why it didn't feel good to be suddenly purposeless in sunny Florida. Those who have retired, she learned, must shape a new identity. "That transition process, even if it's something you wanted, can be very unsettling," says Schlossberg. "But the most important thing tied to your identity is your sense of purpose. That's what gives you the reason to get up in the morning." Of course, that sense of purpose or identity needn't be related to previous professional activities — but Schlossberg's interviews with retired researchers indicate that they need something to define their lives.

"You do feel, a little bit, that you might be kind of sidelined," says Chen, who has noticed that he receives fewer invitations to present at or to organize talks and conferences. But he's not terribly bothered. "I think you have to accept this," he says.

And in any case, Chen notes, he now has time to lunch with old friends whenever they call, and to rekindle old hobbies: singing, and playing the recorder and cello.

Sim also struggled a little at first. As a full-time scientist, she'd found solace in her garden. Once she retired, gardening no longer offered the same sense of escape. It took time to rediscover the joy of tending the plants. Today, she says, retirement feels good. "Now that I've got used to it," says Sim, "it's a very nice way to live." ■

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COLUMN

More than a meeting

Convene a colloquium, says **Francesco Sciortino**.

Organizing a scientific conference can be a daunting prospect. You know that it could offer exceptional career benefits by boosting your network and helping you to develop those famous soft skills: communication, teamwork and time management. But you might think the process involves unacceptable levels of stress, complications to your unpredictable schedule and even more delays to that unfinished project.

Still, you should consider the option. You'll refine skills that are not necessarily innate and that you'll need in any job. Why not hone them in the setting of an enthusiastic student group?

I became involved in student activism during my high-school days in Italy, before I moved to the United Kingdom in 2010 to study physics. As an undergraduate at Imperial College London, I joined student associations to meet like-minded people and to get a taste of a variety of research fields. I set up tours to my department's laboratories and found the gratitude of other students to be extremely rewarding. Through the Imperial College Physics Society, I also co-organized a number of trips, some of which later inspired me to pursue a PhD in plasma physics — none more so than our visits to the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy near Oxford in 2013, 2014 and 2015.

A different chapter began in August 2014, when I and six others joined together to found the Italian Association of Physics Students (AISF). Since then, our group has grown to more than 1,000 members in Italy and has become one of the most active in the International Association of Physics Students (IAPS). We have organized public lectures, lab tours and outreach events, offering simple demonstrations to school groups of all ages and engaging in the International Year of Light celebrations in 2015, which aimed to highlight the importance of light and optical technologies. Since then, the AISF has also set up annual visits to Italy's Gran Sasso National Laboratory in Abruzzo, the European Gravitational Observatory near Pisa and other leading research facilities. The Italian Conference of Physics Students has become our key annual gathering, bringing together more than 100 students from institutions nationwide in a different city each year.

In 2015, one year after we founded the AISF, we submitted a bid to host the 32nd International Conference of Physics Students (ICPS). It sounded a little over-ambitious at first, but we demonstrated that our association could raise the necessary funding and institutional



support. It could hardly have gone better. In August 2017, the ICPS took place in the Italian city of Turin with 450 participants from 44 countries, and included almost 200 talks and posters from university students of all levels. I was part of an outstanding team that helped to exhibit the best of Italian academic research, the wonders of our national cuisine and local artistic treasures. Our programme included trips to the Turin Astrophysical Observatory, Sacra di San Michele Abbey and traditional wine cellars.

Organizing student events shapes how you collaborate with people. I discovered what kind of team player I am. I learnt that balanced group dynamics, rather than individual herculean efforts, best foster motivation, enthusiasm and effectiveness. I've always wanted my impact to exceed my direct reach, and so connecting with others who could carry my efforts forward was essential. Seeing other people independently repeat events that I initiated has been extremely rewarding.

I started out with pragmatism, but little understanding of the art of compromise. That's now been forced into me by countless online meetings, most recently as part of a committee to reform the regulations of the IAPS. The international setting of these efforts also gave me chances to travel, practise languages and gain exposure to fund-raising. I've developed important friendships and boosted the competitiveness of my PhD applications, which in turn brought me to the United States.

Joining student associations, organizing events all over Europe and becoming part of a community of enthusiastic young scientists has helped me to go beyond lecture halls, research labs and supervisor meetings. The skills that I gained have given me the freedom to enjoy much more of my own scientific career. ■

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