



Takin' it to the STREETS

I'm sorry to say that I've only ever been to one MRS Meeting. But it was probably the most important conference of any type I've attended. It was March 2011, the Spring Meeting in San Francisco. I was a third-year graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin, and I was terribly nervous. It was my first time attending a scientific conference. It was also my first time being on the West Coast of the United States.

But what weighed most heavily on me at the time was that it had been only five months since my research advisor had passed away. Our project and my graduate career were just gaining momentum when everything got put on hold. This trip was my chance to carry on the legacy of my mentor's work and share it with a broader audience. That's exactly what happened, but not how I expected.

I was scheduled to present my poster as part of Symposium H: Electrochromic Materials and Devices. It wasn't quite the topic our work fell under, but it was as close as I could get. That became immediately clear when I realized my poster was the only one plastered with basic science in the all-engineering Session H3. My visitors' ears perked up when I mentioned a possible link between our work and display technologies. But they quickly flopped when I added that the electroluminescent phenomenon we were looking at was one-and-done—a quick flicker of light that, at best, would resemble the work of a broken monitor. Still, I managed to attract a decent crowd; electrochemiluminescence, after all, looks rather pretty under a microscope.

My two lab-mates and I, the “Materials Brothers” we called ourselves, rolled up our posters and headed out of the ballroom and back to our room. We had arranged for more economical lodging several blocks down on Market Street.

As we rolled our bags across the asphalt the next morning, we talked about how each of our presentations went, the kind of feedback we received, and the interesting people we met. Maybe it was the San Franciscan street performers who lined each avenue

we passed that inspired him, or simply the fact that he would rattle off anything to get a good laugh, but as we approached a bus shelter ahead, my lab-mate Dave uttered, “What do you guys think? Bonus poster session by the bus stop.” Half tired of walking, half intrigued by the idea, I replied with little hesitation: “Let's do it.”



What we expected to be a short-lived gag became a three-hour social experiment. After popping into a drug store for some tape, we set up shop, lining the Plexiglas walls of the bus shelter with our posters like they were public service announcements. We even followed suit with the John Mayer look-alike beside us and placed a paper bag at our feet to welcome any donations. We quickly learned a valuable lesson in science communication: Getting people interested is really hard.

The number of people remotely interested in hearing about non-Fickian diffusion plummeted from a dozen to zero. But every so often, we managed to reel in a curious onlooker. There was an older woman who beckoned us to teach her two granddaughters “something, anything” while she slipped into Macy's. And the guy who gave us a fascinating, slightly misguided lesson on “frotions” and solar energy. The stop for the 7X bus was a far cry from Session H3, and for me that was a good thing. I walked away from our impromptu poster session with a greater sense of accomplishment and more satisfaction than relief. Add that to the cigarette and about \$10 that made their way into our brown paper bag, and overall I'd say it was a success.

We took down our posters and continued toward the hotel, with Dave belting out the chorus to the Doobie Brothers' classic “Takin' It to the Streets.” As we ambled on, I recalled a conversation I had with my advisor months before. He was raving about a science outreach event to be hosted in Austin that upcoming winter. His passion for science was notoriously contagious. I was caught up in his excitement, humbled that he wanted to include me in putting together some activities for the event. We would never get to speak about it again.

As my graduate days in the lab wound down, I often wondered whether I did right by him: Did I publish enough? Could I have done more? But as I replay that conversation with him now and think back to that day in March at the bus stop, I can't help but believe that I've carried some part of what he represented with me, out of the lab but not away from science.

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