

# FINDING HOPE IN A DARKENING WORLD

*Perimeter donors credit the independence of theoretical physics as its greatest strength.*

In decades of exploration, from the Arctic to Antarctica and many places in between, Mike Cannell and Judith DesBrisay have borne witness to two compounding losses.

The wild places they visit and love are tangibly suffering from the negative impacts of climate change. Meanwhile, public faith in the scientific process that monitors – and could help address – those impacts is quickly eroding.

It would be easy to throw their hands up and retreat to their remote, off-grid second home in BC's interior. Instead, they decided to support theoretical physics by becoming annual Perimeter donors.

The connection they've made isn't quite as odd as it first appears, Cannell explains, particularly given their own relationships with the sciences.

In 1974, Cannell worked on the fabrication of components for the TRIUMF particle beam accelerator. He later spent 18 years as faculty and administration at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. DesBrisay is a retired nurse who sought out many remote postings, and who continues to create works of art exploring the relationship between people, the environment, and science.

In 1997, Cannell was hired to help establish the Centro de Entrenamiento Industrial y Minera, a technical institute in Antofagasta, Chile. While they were there, Cannell and DesBrisay watched the blossoming of the Atacama Desert astronomical telescope industry.

"If you have ever worked in or around such a facility, or hung out in the control room of either an accelerator or an astronomical observatory, one realizes that the entire enterprise is in support of theory and exploration," Cannell says. "The distinction [between them] quickly disappears."

Over decades, Cannell and DesBrisay had an inside view of academic administration and environmental change. It left them despondent about how politics can influence both. That, strangely enough, was what drew them to Perimeter.



Judith DesBrisay,  
"Possibilities 8"

They hope that Perimeter and institutes like it can help bolster the case for science by raising awareness about how essential it is to a healthy society and a healthy planet.

"Theoretical physics is unlikely to be impacted by political or corporate pressure," Cannell says. "I also like the model of PI for the students [and postdocs], that they're working on their own problems and not providing cheap labour or acting as indentured servants for other researchers."

They see a worrying global inclination towards social disintegration and science denialism. Not only is wealth accumulating in fewer hands, but so is power, and the powerful have little incentive to change the system.

"Because we've travelled from pole to pole, from Ellesmere Island and Greenland to the Atacama and the Amazon Basin, we can say with great certainty that the planet's not doing well," Cannell says. "Perimeter won't provide solutions to global problems, but we might learn something interesting for the sake of knowledge."

Perhaps, he adds, a more advanced understanding of scientific concepts can force us to accept the dichotomy facing humankind: ignore nature and we'll destroy ourselves. "The impact of the Anthropocene threatens our survival on planet Earth. Human beings must confront our insignificance in the workings of natural forces and the processes within our universe."

– Tenille Bonoguoire

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