

AT THE MUSEUM

Neal Brown: A legacy of science exploration

By Aelin Allegood

Neal Brown, a distinguished educator, dedicated more than four decades to the University of Alaska Fairbanks and inspired countless individuals with his passion for discovery and education. As a UA Museum of the North Education Affiliate, Neal led family rocket programs and guided development of aurora programs for many years. His impact at the museum continues today through the Neal Brown Museum Education Support Endowment.

Born in 1938, Brown’s journey led him from early work with NASA to becoming a beloved figure in Alaskan science education. After earning his bachelor’s degree from Washington State University in 1961, Brown commenced his career at NASA, focusing on the complexities of atmospheric re-entry for spacecraft. Neal’s fascination with the aurora borealis drew him to Fairbanks in the mid-1960s, where he pursued a master’s degree in geophysics at UAF. This marked the beginning of a lifelong commitment to understanding the aurora, earth’s atmosphere, and space.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FRAN TANNIAN

In July 1980, Neal Brown, Fran Tannian, Michael Sweet, Nat Brown, Steve Sweet, Melody Brown Burkins and Kris Brown posed with their dog Puddles in front of the entrance to Poker Flat Research Range where Neal was the director for 18 years.

At UAF’s Geophysical Institute, Brown’s career and outreach flourished. He served as the director of the Poker Flat Research Range for 18 years, overseeing numerous research projects and rocket launches. Later, he led the Alaska Space Grant Program, promoting education and research in aerospace and earth sciences across the state. In recognition of his significant contributions to the university and Alaska, UAF awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1997.

During his time



UAMN PHOTO

Neal Brown, pictured here teaching a model rocket building program at the museum in 2003, supported museum programs that encouraged people of all ages to learn and discover.

at UAF, Neal was an integral part of museum outreach. He served as a content expert and also directly led activities at the museum like rocket building programs for families. UAMN Director of Exhibits, Design and Digital Media Roger Topp says, “I was new to the museum when I was first introduced to Neal, and he was massively influential in how I now see myself within informal public education. He believed in and caused me to believe in the phenomenon of the museum experience, and giving it every ounce of creativity we have, this infinitely inventive space for students and teachers.” Neal was celebrated for his ability to ignite curiosity in learners of all ages. His enthusiasm for the aurora was infectious. He frequently delivered lectures and workshops, demystifying the northern lights for audiences far and wide. In his own words captured on video, “I give so many

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talks to people about the aurora. I tell them how to photograph it. I tell them about what is going on. Many times I tell them, ‘Don’t even worry about it, just go out and look at it.’”

His family seeks to honor his legacy by fostering the same sense of wonder he instilled in others. His son, Kris Brown explains, “Following the death of my beloved father Neal Brown in 2021, I and my brothers Steve, Nat and Michael, as well as my sister Melody and step-

mother Fran, decided to honor him and his work with the Neal Brown Museum Education Support Endowment, a unique collaboration between the Museum of the North and the Geophysical Institute to promote his passion for learning and instill in others his deep curiosity and interest in Alaskan science.” Kris reflects on his father’s joy in education: “My father loved nothing more than to watch the eyes of a young child, senior, or anyone just light up as he explained the wonders of the aurora.” The endowment honors the memory of Neal by providing

support for education and public programs at the museum. The focus is on science outreach in the community, including partnership with the Geophysical Institute.

Fran Tannian, Neal’s wife of 40 years, shares, “As a father and husband, Neal brought great curiosity into my and our children’s worlds. Neal gave me a spark to my life that I would not have had without him, and I know also enlightened the lives of all of those around him. And I love this Education Support fund because his memory will continue to give joy and promote curiosity for generations

to come.”

The endowment’s inaugural initiative, “Spring Break Science,” is set to launch this March at the UA Museum of the North. Designed to engage families in a flexible way, the program offers a variety of science-themed activities throughout the week. Participants can access a free activity guide, available for download or pickup, featuring at-home and outdoor exploration ideas. The museum will host daily drop-in sessions, showcasing science films and providing materials for self-guided activities such as scavenger hunts, scientific sketching, snow goggle design, and aurora art projects.

The “Spring Break Science” event perpetuates Neal’s commitment to

making science accessible and exciting for all. Through the Neal Brown Museum Education Support Endowment, Neal’s passion for learning and his deep curiosity about Alaska’s science will be shared with generations to come.

Explore more

Take part in Spring Break Science from March 10-14. A detailed schedule and the activity guide will be available on the museum’s website, bit.ly/springbreak-science.

Family programs from the UA Museum of the North are focusing on moose during March. Early Explorers, for children 5 and younger with their caregivers, will be held on March 7. Siblings are welcome.

Family Day: Moose will be held at the muse-

um on March 22 offering a chance for all ages to explore. Kids 17 and under are admitted free on Family Days. Learn more at bit.ly/uamnfamilydays.

Teens are invited to register for the ARTSci Teen Workshop: Ice scheduled for March 20. Explore the connections between art and science. Info and registration at bit.ly/uamnteenshop.

The museum’s winter hours are from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., seven days a week. For more information about the museum’s collections, programs and events, visit www.uaf.edu/museum or call 907-474-7505.

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