

Meet George Blumenthal

Even as kid, George Blumenthal had his head in the clouds. Well, a little higher than that, actually.

The new chancellor of UC Santa Cruz and a member of Joint Venture's board of directors was just an 11-year-old boy growing up in Wisconsin when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, the first artificial satellite, into orbit around the Earth in the fall of 1957. The beach ball-sized orb caught the United States space program by surprise and sparked new interest in space science around the globe.

Even though Moscow was 5000 miles from his Milwaukee home, the event piqued young George's curiosity about the potential for galactic exploration. You might say the impact of the Russians' achievement left him seeing stars.

"Sputnik had a profound effect on American science and it certainly played a part in my interest in space and physics all through high school, college and graduate school," says Blumenthal.

The son of Lillian and Marcel Blumenthal, who operated a small Venetian blind business in Milwaukee, George's interest in science propelled him to his undergraduate degree in physics from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and then to graduate school at UC San Diego, where he earned his Ph.D. in physics.

"I intended to become a particle physicist, but after a year in grad school I became more interested in space and astronomy, so I changed from studying the smallest things in the universe to the biggest, like galaxies."

Blumenthal's own star continued to brighten for the next three decades. He went on to become a distinguished scholar and academic leader, both at UC Santa Cruz and within the UC system. He joined the UCSC faculty in 1972 as a professor of astronomy and astrophysics and has served as the department chair at UCSC, faculty representative to the UC Regents and chair of the UC systemwide Academic Senate.

He became acting chancellor in June 2006 after the untimely death of Chancellor Denise Denton. The Denton tragedy rocked the campus, but as acting chancellor Blumenthal was able to set the proper tone for recovery by communicating with students, faculty and staff, and emphasizing the need to keep moving forward.

"It helped that I had been on the faculty for decades. I wasn't on a standard track to be chancellor, but I knew the university well and people knew me. It was important for me to get out and be visible. I have tried to communicate an upward trajectory."

Last September, after a nationwide search that attracted more than 550 candidates, the Regents determined that the best candidate was already on the job and they officially named Blumenthal to the post. On June 6, George Blumenthal will be formally inaugurated as UCSC's tenth chancellor.

"UC Santa Cruz is a truly special place, and I love it dearly," says Blumenthal, 62. "I am fortunate to become chancellor at a pivotal moment for UCSC. This is a campus on the move."

Blumenthal says he is impressed with the ability of the campus to develop in cross-disciplinary ways, opening whole new fields of endeavor.

"When I came here there was one really outstanding department and now there are many – in all academic divisions, science, engineering, the arts, humanities, social sciences. There are huge pockets of excellence throughout the university. Another one is starting now - digital arts. This is an open area that will become a big field."

Being a department chair or faculty representative is one thing; rising to chancellor of a university with more than 550 faculty and nearly 16,000 students is another challenge altogether.

"I am still the same person I was before," he says, "but the challenge now is taking on a different set of responsibilities, having to shift gears completely five or six times a day." Meetings with staff, political leaders, donors, students and others are juggled with speaking appearances, budget sessions, and community organizations.

Bill Mathews, who taught Blumenthal at San Diego then became his colleague and friend at Santa Cruz for the past three decades, says Blumenthal "is just the kind of person we need right now. He can build relationships on and off campus. He knows how to bridge gaps and understands problems and solutions."

Mathews encouraged Blumenthal to join him on the Santa Cruz faculty in the early 1970s. "We became great friends," says Mathews. "We would ride our bikes every weekend, huffing and puffing, then stop for lunch and talk about physics, campus politics, everything. He was always extremely thoughtful and considerate and had a great sense of justice and compassion for the institution.

"George had all the qualities one would expect in a chancellor, but we never thought he would actually be the chancellor one day."

Those skills should serve Blumenthal well as he continues to build relationships at UCSC and throughout Silicon Valley.

"Working with legislators and business leaders outside the campus is just as important as my duties on campus," he says. "It's important to establish trust with local leaders because they fund the educational mission. I spend a lot of time with our Congressional representatives, state legislators and local government."

Another area that will consume his time is the expansion of the university's education and research programs in Silicon Valley.

UCSC is the lead institution for developing a UC presence in Silicon Valley and is working in partnership with the NASA Ames Research Center, Foothill-De Anza Community Colleges, Santa Clara University and Carnegie Mellon University to plan and develop a new "meta-university" community comprising a portion of the NASA Research Park.

Additionally, NASA Ames and UCSC are partners on a University Affiliated Research Center, a 10-year, \$330 million project in which scientists from both organizations have collaborated over the past four years. Teams are contributing to science and technology discoveries in nanotechnology, space biology, aerospace systems, earth sciences and information sciences.

"Many of UCSC's strengths grow from our physical location," says Blumenthal. "We see a great potential for more research and teaching directly related to Silicon Valley. Our goal is to do things that really make sense for us, NASA and private corporations. One is energy research, especially climate research, making the region and the country more carbon neutral."

Blumenthal knows a little something about space science research, with his own work in theoretical astrophysics spanning such topics as gamma ray bursts, compact X-ray sources, active galactic nuclei and cosmology. He co-authored the book, "21st Century Astronomy," and has written more than 75 scientific publications.

Little wonder that reading is among his top leisure activities, along with exercise, movies and socializing with friends. And family, of course. George's wife, Kelly Weisberg, is a professor at UC's Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco, specializing in children and family law.

In addition to her law degree from UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall, she holds a doctorate in sociology from Brandeis University. She has authored dozens of books, articles. Her background has apparently influenced the couple's son, Aaron, who just graduated from UC Berkeley and is interested in the law. Their daughter, Sarah, is an undergraduate at Harvard University.

Dr. Weisberg's commute to San Francisco is about to lengthen significantly as the couple prepares to move from their home in Monte Sereno to the Chancellor's residence on the UCSC campus.

"I am very fortunate to be here," says Blumenthal. "I always knew that UC Santa Cruz was a place where new things are happening, and it's exciting to be part of it."

Even fifty years after Sputnik, things are still looking up for George Blumenthal.