

How We Know What We Know

This column originally appeared in the March 6, 2009, issue of the Charleston Gazette.

By Paul L. Hill, Ph.D.

Science is all around us. It is in this newspaper and in the coffee you may be drinking as you read this. An avenue to understanding the world around us, it is in every single thing you see and touch every day.

If science affects us all in such a profound way in our everyday lives, why is it not a larger part of our everyday dialogue?

When the Soviets launched Sputnik more than 50 years ago, catching the U.S. off guard, the resulting “space race” immediately created a sense of urgency across the country. Everyone was talking about science, research and technology, and the need to keep up.

Children dreamed of growing up to be scientists and engineers. Policymakers passed laws to increase funding for mathematics and science education. And neighbors talked about the space program over their backyard fences. In a word, science was cool.

Today, sadly, that sense of urgency has faded in our country, replaced by complacency and lack of public engagement in scientific endeavors. We all like “techie” conveniences, but have we lost the curiosity to understand them? How *do* we know what we know?

In an attempt to jump-start the nation’s interest and attention, the scientific community has launched an initiative called “Year of Science 2009.” Hundreds of organizations across the country are joining this yearlong grassroots effort to re-engage the public in science and improve peoples’ understanding about how science works, why it matters and who scientists are.

In nearly every state, including West Virginia, participants in the celebration are demonstrating how we know about our natural world and why science continues to be so vitally important to our communities, our country and the world.

This year was selected because it marks several important milestones in the history of science—the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his “On the Origin of Species;” the 200th anniversary of the birth of President Abraham Lincoln, founder of the National Academy of Sciences; the 400th anniversary of Galileo’s first use of a telescope to study the skies; and the 400th anniversary of the publication of Johannes Kepler’s first two Laws of Planetary Motion.

A special website—www.yearofscience2009.org—is helping the general public learn more about science and this important yearlong national event.



1018 Kanawha Blvd. East Suite 1101
Charleston, West Virginia 25301-2025

phone 304 558 4128 fax 304 558 2321

www.wvresearch.org

Here in West Virginia, a statewide STaR (Science, Technology and Research) Symposium is being planned for April to provide a forum for people involved at every level of the state's science and technology enterprise. Information about the symposium and other Year of Science 2009 initiatives in West Virginia is available online at www.wvresearch.org.

I invite all West Virginians to learn more about the role of science and research in our state, nation and world by visiting the website, by attending a Year of Science event or, even better, by initiating grassroots science programs in their own communities. Find out how fun and accessible science can be!

Hill is the vice chancellor for science and research at the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.