



Eric Van Stryland
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jumped at the chance. Our work in that group helped to launch the first optics kits, which have evolved today into a key outreach component for student chapters at universities worldwide.

Fast forward to 2004, and I had the honor of being elected as vice president of the society and was part of the leadership team who supported the launch of the Optica Foundation. At the time, the board was focused on creating an organization to enhance and build upon the student experience and draw in the next generation of optics and photonics scientists and engineers.

That work has yielded results. Looking back on my tenure as part of Optica’s leadership, I realized that when I started on the presidential chain, Optica had around 25 student chapters, and by the time I cycled off, we had grown to upwards of 70. Today, student chapters number more than 400 worldwide.

Launching the Siegman International School on Lasers
As the foundation gained its foothold, its programs expanded to offer greater opportunity for impact, including hosting forums that brought students from around the world together to enhance their

skills and network. For instance, the Siegman International School on Lasers—a program close to my heart and one I am proud to say I helped to build—assembles 100 emerging leaders each year for an in-depth education on lasers and their applications.

The Siegman School arose from the desire to facilitate simpler global connections. In 2009, I joined Optica CEO Liz Rogan, then-President Tom Baer, and a few others on a trip to China to expand our relationship with the Chinese optics and

photonics community. We met with Chinese officials to discuss

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NEXT GENERATION STORIES

Creating a professional home for the next generation.

Optica has always been my professional home. When I was a graduate student at the University of Arizona in the 1970s, I joined the society, gave a talk at the Annual Meeting in Tucson, and it made such an impact on me that I have attended each one thereafter.

Engaging with Optica as a student enhanced my professional journey. For instance, student education has always been a priority for me. So, in 1987, when Optica President Bob Greenler nominated me to join what was then the Education Council, I



Student poster prize winners and Eric Van Stryland at the first Siegman School in 2014.

holding a school of optics in China. We were able to act on this vision, and Optica Past Presidents Tony Siegman, Chris Dainty and I helped to organize the inaugural event in Changchun in 2010 to much success.

Unfortunately, the next year Tony Siegman passed away. At that point, the Optica Foundation decided to honor his legacy by establishing an annual event like the one in Changchun, naming it the Siegman International School on Lasers. I was humbled to become the program chair, for the first few years, and we held the first event under its new name at Tony's academic home, Stanford University, in 2014. 2024 is the 10th anniversary of this prestigious school, and it's apropos that it will take place back at Stanford.

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Continuing the Impact in 2023

We've had many successes with the foundation, but the work is far from done. As optics and photonics grow in prevalence as part of today's advanced technologies, the need

for students to pursue this field continues to rise, and the foundation remains a primary vehicle for connecting emerging leaders with the broader optics and photonics community.

I have been fortunate to witness its impact firsthand over the past year. In fact, over the U.S. celebration of Thanksgiving, I spent a week in Recife, Brazil, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the start of the Recife chapter. There were at least three student chapters represented at the meeting—one of which I had initially helped to start up—and the enthusiasm was contagious. I spent a fair amount of time emphasizing the benefits of optics and photonics as a field of study and demonstrating its impact in some of the most profound consumer and scientific advances of the past decade.

Building for the Future

Today, the Optica Foundation has its eyes set on the future. Building on these key programs to provide not only student support and global connections, it also now boasts numerous opportunities for scholarships, prizes, in-depth training and skill-building programs to nurture the future of optics and photonics. When I think back to our vision for what the foundation could be, I can honestly say that it has exceeded all expectations, emerging



Eric and the Optica Student Chapter in Recife, Brazil.

as a vital contributor to advancing the science of light worldwide. I have always believed that current students are next-generation leaders and the lynchpin for future light-based innovations. It's a privilege to have given and to continue to give back to my professional home through the Optica Foundation. Through its programs and initiatives, we are growing the global optics and photonics community and expanding our collective impact, and that's a cause that will stand the test of time.

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Eric Van Stryland was the 2006 Optica President and is a donor and active participant in the Optica Foundation today. He is an emeritus professor and founding dean of CREOL, The College of Optics and Photonics at the University of Central Florida (UCF).
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