

SIRTF Profiles: Dr. Keven Uchida

Cornell University

Now that IOC is finished, and we are approaching normal operations with SIRTF, it is perhaps fitting that I take some time out to tell everyone how, and why, I got involved with this magnificent project. Born in 1963 in a remote mango grove on the big island of Hawaii, I was the first person from my village to eat vegetables and bathe regularly. While other members of my extended family were pre-occupied with warlike rituals and occasionally ambushing slow-footed tourists from the mainland, I would stare at the night sky and dream about the stars and how my royal Samoan ancestors used them to navigate their small boats filled with pigs and family members to Hawaii. I desperately wanted to know how far away they were, how old they were, and how well they could be centroided. I somehow knew there was a life for me beyond the cannibalism and head-hunting that had defined my life as a small child.



Although I was often ridiculed by other Hawaiian children for my fanciful dreams, unusually large head, and utter lack of body hair, my parents always encouraged me, saving enough money from their night-time raids of Mauna-Kea's vast marijuana fields to pay for me to attend the Hawaiian Preparatory Academy, in Waimea. At the academy I first learned about the lives and discoveries of Newton, Copernicus and Galileo – men willing to risk everything for their science. They became my inspiration. It wasn't all book learning at the Academy, however. I excelled in football, becoming the first student to rush for over 1000 yards in a single season without a helmet !! A bronze plaque commemorating the day I passed the 1000 yard mark, and received my fifth concussion of the season, still graces the entrance to the main building in Waimea.

After being sidelined with a devastating colon injury in my junior year (one which would plague me my entire adult life), I threw myself into my studies, finally gaining admission to the University of Hawaii. There, I double majored in Physics and Barbecuing, spending countless days and nights in the library thumbing through books on infrared astronomy and outdoor grilling techniques, indulging my twin loves – science and meat. When I finally graduated the University of Hawaii, I was lucky enough to be accepted into the graduate astronomy department of UCLA.

I don't think anything could have prepared me for life in Los Angeles. The juxtaposition of staggering wealth and abject poverty, vast opportunity and utter despair, haunting beauty and un-imaginable filth, was overwhelming. It excited and frightened me. I knew at some level the twin worlds of L.A. reflected the primal battle raging within myself, as I tried to balance my awe and disgust for the caucasian world. Between

frequent visits to the L.A. Gun Club and Fredericks of Hollywood, where I made money as a male underwear model, I studied with Dr. Mark Morris at UCLA. With Mark, I focused on the dust around evolved stars in our Galaxy. I found graduate school quite a challenge, but a very rewarding one at that. I eventually got my PhD after eight years, but it would not have been possible without the excellent mentoring and late-night bull sessions with fellow students, Robert Hurt and Deborah Levine. Both Robert and Deborah also now work on SIRTf, and a day does not go by that I don't give thanks for having them both in my life this long.

After graduating from UCLA, I moved on to a postdoctoral appointment at the Ohio State University, in Columbus Ohio. There, I was fortunate enough to work with Dr. Kris Sellgren, one of the discoverers of PAH molecules in the Interstellar Medium of the Milky Way, publishing several papers on infrared spectroscopy of reflection nebulae. My time in Ohio taught me one valuable lesson that had nothing to do with astronomy – I love freezing cold weather !! In fact, my body simply does not function properly when the outside air is above 50 degrees, F. When it was time to leave Ohio State, I was utterly dejected at my prospects for finding work in another frigid environment – especially one that would allow me access to large telescopes, until I answered an ad for a position at Cornell University to work on the SIRTf IRS team with Dr. Jim Houck.

At Cornell, I was immediately accepted into the IRS family. With members from Germany, Greece, Canada and Great Britain, not to mention the southern U.S., my many personality and hygiene-related quirks were easily overlooked by the team. During my time at Cornell, I came to like working with white people. Despite their physical repulsiveness, many of them are highly intelligent. I immediately took over the planning for In Orbit Checkout for the IRS, although I had to wrestle this responsibility from other team members. Quite a few were resistant to giving up the load and glory of IOC, but they finally handed me the baton. I had no idea this was such a huge mistake. The phrase, "I'm a Dead Man" was to become my mantra over the next two and a half years.



Well, with IOC finished, we have finally come full circle in this story. I am happy to report that I am still alive !! Yes, it is true that my colon, and my entire digestive track, is a bit worse for wear. And yes, I have gone through my share of emergency underwear and Bacardi 151 at the SSC during my two months of IOC, but I am still standing and ready to go home to freezing, cold Ithaca. I have found the peak-up arrays, and I can at last return to my normal life of frostbitten fingers, rock-hard nipples, and ascended testicles. At least I have saved up enough money during IOC to finally afford the butt implants I've been dreaming about since college. It has indeed been a difficult and often painful road, but well worth the trip.