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OBITUARY

VIRPI NIEMELA
1936–2006

Virpi Niemela was undoubtedly a pioneer astronomer. She managed to pursue her work and fulfill her goals but at the same time, she was building the road so that others could follow easily. We will not only limit ourselves to a paper and prize accountancy, but will rather try to make a more complete picture of what Virpi's impact in the local and global astronomical community.

Virpi Niemela was born in Helsinki on December 26th, 1936, and at the age of 17 she would face her first challenge as her family had decided to move to Argentina. She recalled her father told her at that time that they were moving because he could not afford University studies in Finland for all his children, and he had learned that the state-run University in Argentina was (and still is) free of charge. Therefore, at the time when she had to start an University career, she also had to learn a new language and mould to a very different society. After living in Argentina for more than fifty years it is strightforward to say that she had mingled almost perfectly, if it were not for some trouble with genders in spanish language and a particular accent which Virpi herself would never admite she still had.

In her presentation included in this volume Virpi recalls her engagement with massive stars' astrophysics under the supervision of Professor Jorge Sahade when studying at the Facultad de Ciencias Astronómicas y Geofísicas de La Plata. From that moment on, she dedicated fully to study the interactions between massive binaries, including her beloved WR stars. She always reminded us about binarity among massive stars: "You can only confirm that a massive star *is* a binary, but never that it is not" was one of her favourite sayings. And she would methodically keep track of massive stars radial velocity behaviour until she was able to determine the orbital parameters of the long period ones. Virpi always reminded us of how wrong we could be interpreting the top end of the IMF if we neglected the possible (and most probable, in Virpi's words) binary nature of the objects we were observing. The finding of a binary pair, particularly for the WR + O configuration, triggered a detailed study of the interactions of the stellar winds and the mass transfer between its components, as she mentioned in her presentation during the Meeting opening.

Virpi was passionate about everything she did. She strongly backed everything she believed in and did not refrain from saying what she thought needed to be said. This was not appreciated by directors during the military rule in Argentina and she was sacked from her positions (teaching at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata and researching at Conicet) in 1979. Once again, Virpi's spirit would be strong enough to overcome this, and she kept working in astronomy on her own. Several papers published with "Villa Elisa, Buenos Aires" as her working address are a reminder of those difficult days she went through. As soon as the political situation cleared a bit, she earned a position at the Comisión de Investigaciones Científicas de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (CIC) which she held until her death, and the Instituto de Astrofísica del Espacio (IAFE) at Buenos Aires recruited her as part of its research staff. She would work there – and begin supervising her first students – for about a decade until she moved back to La Plata to take an appointment as Professor at the Facultad de Ciencias Astronómicas y Geofísicas, where she had earned both her academical degrees (MSc and PhD). The University would also further acknowledged her work as researcher and in the formation of new generations of astronomers by naming her as Emeritus Professor in 2005.

Another aspect where Virpi also played a key and inspirational role was when fighting for women's rights within the scientific research community. She strongly pointed out cases where she realised that gender seggregation was taking place when assesing candidates for job positions, and pushed to include maternity leaves for female postgraduate students with research council grants. Virpi would also embark on a chimerical fight against the compulsory use of licensed software for grants and reports paperwork, winning a handful of battles in a neverending war.

Virpi received several other distinctions recognizing her career. In 1998 the Academia Nacional de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas y Naturales awarded her the Carlos Varsavsky prize for her contribution to Argentine astronomy and would appoint her as Member (the second female member in the history of the Academy) in the year 2000. In 2003 she was awarded the Platinum Prize in Astronomy by the Fundación Konex Argentina, an award given only once every decade. As we also learned during the meeting, Virpi had an asteroid (5289 Niemela KG2) named after her by the staff at the Observatorio Felix Aguilar in San Juan, Argentina, and the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) had named her Associate, second only to her mentor– Jorge Sahadae –in receiving this appointment.

Besides degrees, prizes and other formal awards, the *Massive Stars: Fundamental Parameters and Circumstellar Interactions* meeting was the best way to measure the impact that Virpi had on the astronomical community. What we had initially planned as a specialized gathering of a few dozen colleagues, bursted into a hundred participant conference that nobody wanted to miss. Virpi exerted a magnetic attraction that gathered astronomers from all over the world in Cariló, Argentina, to honor and greet her. As Nolan Walborn pointed out during the acknowledgment after Phil Massey's emotive conference summary, she had triggered the first ever "Beach Symposia" in Argentina. Another "first" for such an outstanding woman.

Virpi passed away on December 18th, 2006. Only a few days after the conference had ended. We all deeply wish we were not writing these pages but we take comfort that she did not only lead a fruitful life researching and sharing all she knew with her collaborators and students, but that we all had our last chance to show her how much we loved her.

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