

Chairs' Corner – December 2005
Don Brownlee and Stardust

TO: UW Foundation, Campaign Cabinet, Deans, Development & Alumni Staff
FROM: William H. Gates, Chair, and Orin C. Smith, Vice Chair, UW Foundation

Dear Friends,

The holidays are upon us. Whatever our individual traditions, there are some common elements we cherish: light in the darkness, gifts, festivity, hopes for the new year to come, and perhaps a chance to withdraw from the daily round and ponder the meaning of our brief time on the planet.

In a month all that will be a memory. But we would like to alert you now to an event on January 15th that, to us, seems almost hauntingly appropriate to the old themes and images we are celebrating now. On that date, in the middle of the night, in the cold Utah desert, a small space capsule will end its fiery re-entry into the atmosphere by depositing on the desert floor the fragments of a comet—the first ever to be brought to earth. And in those fragments scientists hope to find clues to the origins of our solar system and perhaps of life on earth.

The man primarily responsible for this astonishing feat is UW astronomy professor Don Brownlee. In the 1990s he conceived and designed the space mission he called Stardust, whose goal, he said, was “to get a comet and put it in the lab.” Professor Brownlee’s mission was chosen by NASA over 26 competitors. In 1999 the Stardust spacecraft set out on its journey to meet comet Wild 2. Almost five years and billions of miles later, the encounter took place: the spacecraft flew directly through the comet and collected roughly a thousand particles of comet debris. Now, after another two years, the culmination of all that work and waiting is about to take place.

“I try not to think about it,” says Professor Brownlee, who will be standing by in the desert that January night. Even after the spectacular achievements of the mission so far, there’s no guarantee of final success. But he thinks the odds are very good—“maybe 90 percent.”

Like many UW scientists we have met, Don Brownlee combines scientific dispassion with a deep sense of the poetry of his work. “Comets,” he writes in an essay on the Stardust Web site, “are mysterious travelers from the frigid and most distant parts of the solar system. . . . Like a fantastic library, they have preserved materials and records of our formation.”

The chance to read those materials and records was the great lure of the Stardust mission. Once the capsule is opened, its precious comet dust will be distributed to scientists around the world. Professor Brownlee, of course, will bring his share back to the UW. He can hardly wait for his first glimpse in the electron microscope. “We’ll know certain

things almost instantly,” he says. But there are also questions that will occupy many minds for many years, including “things we never even thought of asking.”

We invite you to follow this exciting story on the NASA Web site:

<http://stardust.jpl.nasa.gov> Meanwhile, we wish you joy and peace in this holiday season.

Bill and Orin

Looking Back

- As of November 30, 2005, our **total Campaign giving since July 1, 2000, reached \$1,532,413,777** toward our Campaign goal of \$2 billion.
- The November Report of Contributions Notes is attached and contains fundraising details.

Looking Ahead

- **Friday, January 27, 2006**, Foundation Board & Campaign Cabinet Meeting, Walker-Ames Room of Kane Hall, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, April 28, 2006**, Foundation Board & Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting. Washington Weekend April 27-29, 2006.
- **Friday, September 8, 2006**, Foundation Board Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee, 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, September 8, 2006**, Fifth Annual Recognition Gala, Suzzallo Library.
- **Friday, January 26, 2007**, Foundation Board & Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, April 27, 2007**, Foundation Board & Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting. Washington Weekend April 26-28, 2007.
- **Friday, September 7, 2007**, Foundation Board Campaign Cabinet Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee, 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, September 7, 2007**, Sixth Annual Recognition Gala, Suzzallo Library.