

MODERN LUXURY

ASPEN PEAK

MIND, BODY, SPIRIT
The Aspen Idea in 2018
Alive and Well?



Plus

Ted Bundy's Snowmass Murder
and Other True Crimes,
App Dating in Aspen &
Are We Living in an Energy Vortex?



OWN ASPEN?

CAN THE ASPEN IDEA
BE BOUGHT AND
SOLD OR DOES IT
RESIDE WITHIN US?

BY AMIEE WHITE BEAZLEY

I turned the newspaper pages one by one. For a while, it seemed, every advertisement echoed the same indulgence. Sprawled across a beauty shot of properties in the West End, on Main Street or Red Mountain, oversized letters read: "Own Aspen." And every time the words, boldfaced and centered, registered in my brain, I balked.

"The Aspen Idea can't be a commodity when it is already free," says Paul Andersen, writer, naturalist and a man regarded by many as Aspen's last living philosopher, a student of the minds who helped found modern Aspen and the Aspen Idea—Goethe, Schweitzer, Adler, Paepcke.

Andersen explains that Aspen, and the Aspen Idea, was never intended to be something one could buy, but instead something one could only achieve over a lifetime. "The ideas of Aspen cannot be exchanged in dollars or property. It cannot be bought and sold—it is already inside of all."

He directs me to a monument of Aspen that only a few know or remember. Hidden in a corner of Paepcke Park, shrouded by overgrown limbs of aged spruces is a bust of Albert Schweitzer, philosopher, physician and keynote speaker for the Goethe Bicentennial Celebration of 1949 that launched the Aspen Institute, his only visit to the United States.

"Looking with the eyes of the spirit upon nature, as it is within ourselves, we find that in us also there is matter and spirit," Schweitzer said in his Aspen lecture. "We belong to the world of the spirit. We must let ourselves be guided by it. The spirit is light,

which struggles with matter, which represents darkness. What happens in the world and within ourselves is the result of this encounter."

The visit from Schweitzer and his interpretation of Goethe's stance on nature, spirit and humanity, was at the time a representation of all that Aspen was intended to be—a utopia that put forth a utopian ideal. Yet today, Schweitzer's likeness is hidden, his message lost in darkness, all but removed from the Aspen we know today.


Toward the end of her life, Elizabeth Paepcke, modern-day town founder, benefactor behind the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies and wife of Walter, was heartbroken over the way Aspen seemed to be pulling away from its roots, and yet she was hopeful that the place where mind, body and spirit could coexist within all of its residents would live on. "Aspen," she said, "can't be swallowed by the avariciousness of those who don't understand the reason for its existence."

To all of us who have coveted Aspen, tried to "own Aspen," to think for a moment she was ours—that we are not but stewards or mere passers through—I offer this to you: Instead of trying to own Aspen, buy into the value of the Aspen Idea. Buy into pushing your body to the tops of mountains; read, debate and wonder with your neighbors beneath a cloudless sky on a summer day; lie among grasshoppers in high grass and breathe deeply letting your spirit grow. Buy into a connection with something bigger than yourself, and instead of owning Aspen, let Aspen own you. ■



BY M. JOHN FAYHEE
PORTRAIT BY JIM PAUSSA

From String Theory to the Big *Bang*!



The Harry Teague-designed
Aspen Center for Physics
building and campus at dusk

How the Aspen Center for Physics became Shangri-La to physicists everywhere

Your average well-read person will have heard of string theory. Probably couldn't explain the operational details if their life depended on it, but at least they understand enough to know its discovery was of cosmological-scale importance.

Few know that string theory reached peer-reviewed coalescence in Aspen.

This was no accident or coincidence. It wasn't like John Schwarz—considered one of the fathers of string theory—happened to be hanging out in the J-Bar in 1984 when the lightbulb went on. (Well, actually, that is sort of how it happened.) Schwarz was a regular researcher at the Aspen Center for Physics and the dialogues he participated in there, over the years, contributed mightily to one of the most important discoveries since Einstein broached the groundbreaking notion of general relativity in 1915.

It can be argued that, in the past half-century, Aspen has become the physics capital of the world. More than 10,000 physicists, including 52 Nobel laureates, have come to the Aspen Center for Physics to ponder, argue and discover new ideas from itty-bitty quarks clear up to the Big Bang.

How on earth did a small Colorado mountain town become the apex of what many people consider the most foundational branch of science?

It all started when

George Stranahan, then a student at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, began spending his summers in Aspen in the late 1950s. He fell in love with the place enough that he decided to move his family to this altitudinous hamlet.

"I'm a theorist," he says. "I can do physics anywhere."

The problem was that, when it came to pondering space, time, energy and force—the fundamentals of physics—Stranahan soon came to understand that, when he was hiking or dropping a hook in the Roaring Fork River, he missed rubbing elbows with members of his cerebral kith and kin. "Pretty soon I realized that doing physics is not me alone. I needed to talk to somebody. So, I figured, we needed an institute out here for physicists to come and talk to each other in this wonderful place."

The process of physicist importation began soon thereafter.

In 1961, Stranahan and fellow physicist Michael Cohen, of the University of Pennsylvania, approached Robert Craig, the new executive director of the Aspen Institute, with a proposal: starting a unique research center where theoretical physicists might gather to hobnob. It would be an unstructured environment, free from distractions, where physicists could work unfettered by their normal responsibilities. No dealing with graduate students. No grading papers.

Craig, who passed away several years ago, jumped on the idea. Supported by the Aspen Institute and numerous eminent physicists, by 1962 the first building provided offices for 45 visiting physicists. The center had soon gained a worldwide reputation as a unique environment for the pursuit of basic scientific knowledge. In 1968, it became an independent nonprofit corporation, sharing 70 acres of what was then mostly undeveloped land in the West End with the Aspen Institute and the Aspen Music Festival and School.

Basically, the idea was to establish a summer camp for physicists, says Stranahan, who served as the first president of the Physics Center. Stranahan adds that was a

fortuitous time to ignite such an enterprise, since the Cold War was raging and, in the eyes of the government, the word "physics" was essentially synonymous with "nuclear research," which was considered a big-time net positive in those DEFCON-dominated days. Now the center's \$1.9 million annual budget is underwritten to a large extent by the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy, the Office of Naval Research and numerous academic institutions.

Still, the first years were lean. Loyal "Randy" Durand, a specialist in theoretical high-energy physics, remembers that early-era attendees pitched in to help paint and insulate the center's second building.

"We had to get the world's preeminent physicists to volunteer to help us winterize the building. We paid them in pizza. As we worked, we talked about physics," says Durand, who served as the second president of the center.

"The idea from the beginning was to get physicists, first of all, out of their comfort zone, but, second, interacting with other physicists in a setting that was congenial and not institutional. The benefit was that we got physicists from a wide array of fields who would not normally interact with each other. A lot of important physics has come from here. There is no other place like it in the world."

In simplest terms, the way it works is this: The center, which has distinct summer and winter programming seasons, organizes seminar series with names like "Superconformal Field Theories and Geometry" and "Topological Phases and Excitations of Quantum Matter." Physicists from all over the world apply to attend these seminars. A committee eyeballs the applications and determines who passes muster. For the upcoming season, there were 800 applicants for 600 spots.

At the heart of the operation is Smart Hall—named not for the intellect of those found within its walls but, rather, after the family that helped fund its construction. The center, which now brings about 1,000 physicists a year to Aspen, eventually outgrew the humble cluster of edifices that housed its operations for more than 30 years. Smart Hall, designed by legendary local architect Harry Teague, was constructed in 1995.

"It was designed primarily for interaction," Teague says. "All of the offices are meant to be shared by two people. The office doors generally remain open. There are alcoves. People are here to do work, but they are also here to talk."

Those assuming that the interior of the Aspen Center for Physics would resemble the bridge of the Starship Enterprise will be surprised to learn that the most poignant example of the interactive nature of Smart Hall is, of all analog, low-tech accouterments, blackboards—which dominate the interior-decorating motif. They are everywhere. And, upon them are found the kinds of baffling scribbles that, to liberal arts types, might as well be penned in a mixture of ancient Sanskrit and binary code.

"Physicists gather around a blackboard, and while one writes formulas furiously, the others chime in with agreements or criticisms and suddenly there's a burst of laughter," says Patty Fox, office manager and outreach coordinator at the center. "Physicists can be very competitive, but they can also be very open to other people's input—and the jokes take the edge off the criticisms."

This, Durand says, can amount to the first tentative steps of the all-important peer review process.

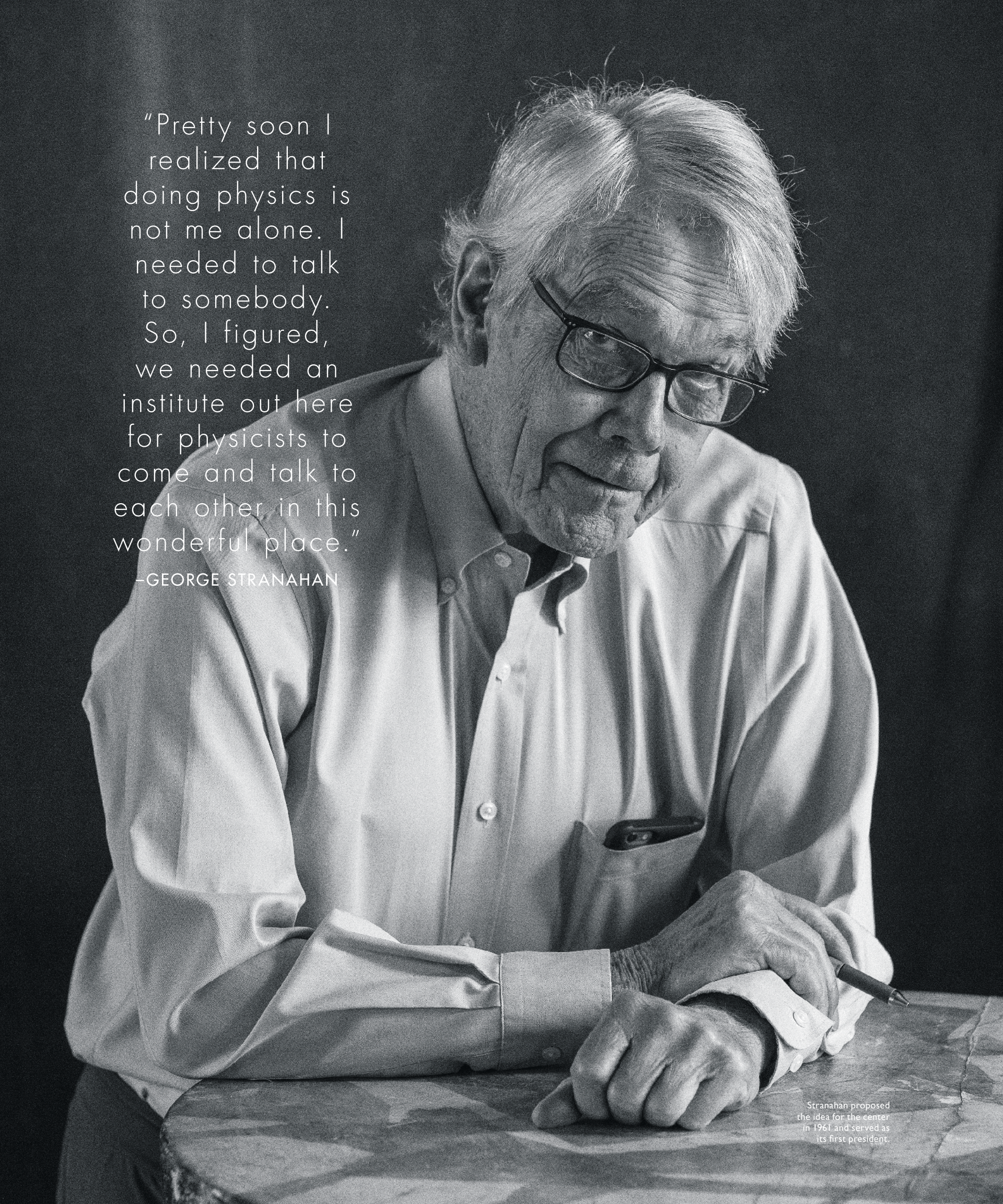
According to current president Hiroshi Ooguri, the success of the Aspen Center for Physics relies to some extent on that which attracted Stranahan to the area a half-century prior: the beauty of the surrounding area.

"Part is exercise, just getting outdoors with fellow physicists," says Ooguri, whose day job is professor and director of the Institute for Theoretical Physics at Caltech. "But it's also the power of the landscape." Durand agrees. "I had one of the best talks I have ever had while eating lunch with a fellow physicist on the top of Pyramid Peak after we ascended via an unusual route," he says. "Physics works well with the out-of-doors. It's all about, 'Should we go this way or that way?' Physics is about problem solving. You have no idea what you might encounter. Basically, it is exploring. The same can be said about being out in the mountains."

Just because the Physics Center is enclosed does not mean it is cloistered. Its mission transcends a gaggle of brainiacs gathering to talk about massive black hole mergers and such. The center prides itself on bringing things like string theory to the huddled masses. To that end, it offers a long-running series of public programs, held mainly at the Wheeler Opera House.

The presentations are extremely well attended, which speaks to how intertwined the center is with the social fabric of the physics capital of the world.

"I don't think this would have worked if the Physics Center would have been located in Nebraska," Durand says. ■

A black and white photograph of an elderly man with glasses, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt. He is leaning forward with his arms crossed on a wooden table, holding a pen in his right hand. The background is dark and out of focus.

"Pretty soon I realized that doing physics is not me alone. I needed to talk to somebody. So, I figured, we needed an institute out here for physicists to come and talk to each other in this wonderful place."

—GEORGE STRANAHAN

Stranahan proposed the idea for the center in 1961 and served as its first president.