

Nick Hitchon Is Better Known for Being in the “Up” Movies than for His Physics

It can be humiliating to have your life publicly chronicled, says Nick Hitchon, a physicist at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. He should know. Hitchon is one of the participants in a documentary film series that explores class structure in the UK by following the lives of people from different classes. The series began with *Seven Up* in 1964, when Hitchon and 13 other seven-year-olds were first interviewed on such topics as what they wanted to be when they grew up, whether they had a girl- or boyfriend, and what they thought about “the poor” and “the rich.” Every seven years since then, director Michael Apted has been back to ask similar questions. The latest film in the series, *42 Up*, is playing in movie theaters around the US now, and the video is scheduled for release in December.

“When I grow up, I want to learn about the Moon and all that,” the seven-year-old Hitchon said in 1964. Looking back, he now says, “I think what got me going about the Moon was Yuri Gagarin going into orbit,” referring to the Soviet cosmonaut who in 1961 became the first human in space. “He was my hero at the time.”

Hitchon was selected to be in the documentary because he was from the rural working class and was willing to talk to the camera. He grew up on a small farm in the Yorkshire Dales, and crossed class lines by going to what other local kids called a “snob school,” and later by studying at the University of Oxford, where he earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in physics, and was awarded a PhD for theoretical calculations for a fusion

reactor design. Then he “got scared off by the staggering problems” facing fusion energy production, and switched to computational plasma physics. He’s been on the Madison faculty since 1981, and his work these days involves calculations of confined plasmas for such things as spacecraft propulsion and modification of semiconductor surfaces. Despite having three books and nearly 70 papers to his credit, Hitchon says that “it’s hard to imagine what I could do professionally that would be as notable as being in these films.” Every now and then, he adds, “Michael [Apted] asks me what I do. When I try to explain, his eyes glaze over.”

One thing the “Up” films do show, Hitchon says, “is that the working classes are proud to be the backbone of society. The films tried to show that they resent it, but they don’t.” What the British working classes do resent, he continues, is people getting out of their place—“my coming to America was very controversial.” Hitchon moved to the US when he was 24 because it “was a bigger scientific pond.” But, he says, when the move was recounted in *28 Up*, “I was portrayed as having sold out.”

So how has having his life publicly documented affected him? That’s hard to tell, he says: “It’s like quantum mechanics—when you measure something, you alter it. But [the films] may have contributed to me doing more than I would have otherwise imagined. When people show up and make a movie about you for no apparent reason, you think strange and interesting things can happen.”

TONI FEDER

Recovery Continues in Physics Job Market

In the US, unemployment rates six months after graduation for 1997 physics and astronomy degree recipients were the lowest in more than a decade—2% at the PhD level, and 3% at the bachelor’s level—a recent survey by the American Institute of Physics has found.

About half of 1997 physics bachelor’s degree recipients went directly on to graduate school. Of those entering the workforce, about 70% found jobs in industry, where they earned a median annual salary of \$37 000, up 16% from the previous year. By comparison, the 34% of new physics PhD recipients who joined the industrial sector had a median salary of \$62 000; the salaries earned by astronomy degree recipients were comparable.

The proportion of physics doctorates in the class of 1997 accepting permanent positions, mostly in industry, was more than double that of a low point a decade earlier, which the survey report attributes to both the strong US economy and shifts in graduates’ long-term career goals.

Single copies of the *1998 Initial Employment Report: Follow-Up of 1997 Physics and Astronomy Degree Recipients* are available free of charge from AIP, Education and Employment Statistics Division, 1 Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740; e-mail stats@aip.org; Web <http://www.aip.org/statistics/trends/emptrends.htm>.

IN BRIEF

Assessing graduate programs. Are you a graduate student or recent PhD recipient? If so, the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS) invites you to participate in its Web-based National Doctoral Program Survey. You’ll be asked to evaluate your US or Canadian graduate program in terms of, among other things, climate, curriculum, teacher training, guidance provided for both academic and nonacademic careers, and overall satisfaction. As Adam Fagen, a Harvard University graduate student in science education who chairs NAGPS’s committee on faculty–student relations, points out, “It’s hard to get a sense of the overall student experience. . . . And where there are problems, all too often they are not addressed as well as they should be, because no one outside the program knows about it.” The aims of the survey, Fagen continues, are to

“WHEN I GROW UP, I want to learn about the Moon and all that,” said the seven-year-old Nick Hitchon. In *42 Up*, physicist Hitchon visits his childhood school in rural England. (Courtesy of First Run Features.)

