

# AMERICAN FRIENDS

OF THE **ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT FOUNDATION**

# STRATA

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*Humboldt.*

14 September 1769 – 6 May 1859

**Celebrating the 250th anniversary of Alexander von Humboldt's birth.**

## Our Mission:

To become a leading source in the United States for the promotion of national and international networking, exchange, and creative collaboration among scientists, scholars, artists, and other professionals, consistent with the goals of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation of Germany.



## Our Vision:

To mobilize the intellectual curiosity, creativity, experience, and passion of Humboldtians to shape research, higher education, and professional development in the United States and beyond.

## Message from the President



*Under the leadership of our Board, we have launched a multi-year effort to speak with Humboldtians across the country to learn how we may support and engage alumni.*

**Dr. Cathleen S. Fisher**

This past year American Friends of AvH has joined the Humboldt Foundation and 29,000 Humboldtians worldwide in marking the 250th anniversary of Alexander von Humboldt's birth. In the United States, where Humboldt has been all but forgotten, we have drawn attention to the continued relevance of this extraordinary individual—a cosmopolitan polymath who advanced a wholistic approach to the study of nature, a sponsor of young scholars and avid 19th century “networker,” and a prolific communicator of the wonder of scientific discovery. Among other activities, we were pleased to partner with the German Embassy to host a special lecture by Andrea Wulf, author of the Humboldt biography, *The Invention of Nature*, and to support the American Geophysical Union in its plans for a special Union session on Humboldt's continued impact.

Above all, however, we have celebrated this special “Humboldt year” by engaging and honoring the living embodiment of the Humboldt ethos: the over 5,400 members of the US Humboldt Alumni Network. Under

the leadership of our Board, we have launched a multi-year effort to speak with Humboldtians across the country to learn how we may support and engage alumni, including in their desire to give back through volunteer work, mentorship, financial donations, or other means. Many of you have told us how important it is that younger generations of researchers have the opportunity to benefit from the “Humboldt experience,” an experience often described in vivid and compelling terms.

Beyond its scholarly value, the US Humboldt Alumni Network is a living return on Germany's investment in the Humboldt Foundation and its exercise of “foreign cultural policy” through support of scientific exchange. In our conversations with US Humboldtians, we have found enduring good will toward, and a deep understanding of, Germany. While perhaps less spectacular than other higher-profile events that have marked the “Year of Germany,” launched by the German Foreign Office last October, the ties between US Humboldtians and their

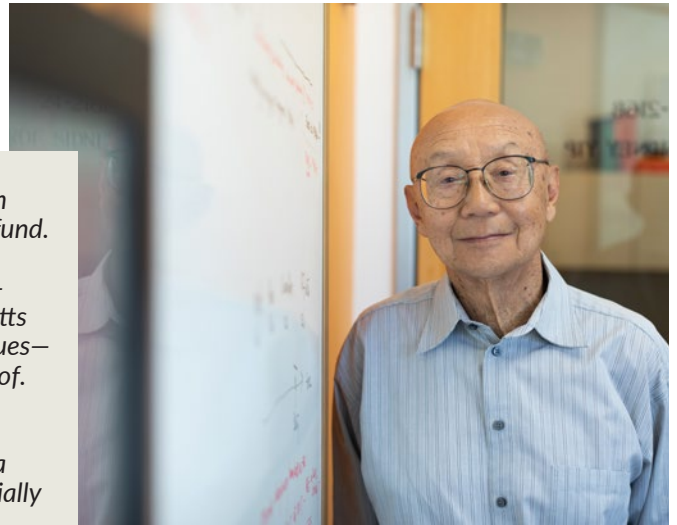
German hosts and institutions are perhaps the truest expression of the initiative's “Wunderbar together” tagline. At a time of fragmenting alliances, transatlantic tensions, and new barriers to international research collaborations, the Humboldt network is science diplomacy at its best.

In the spirit of the Humboldt year, this edition of *STRATA* continues the migration to a longer narrative format to showcase the work, insights, contributions, and humanity of the extraordinary scholars, scientists, and other professionals in the US Humboldt Alumni Network, which continues to advance knowledge, build trust, and deepen international understanding in the true spirit of Alexander von Humboldt.

## Donor Spotlight - Professor Sidney Yip: In His Own Words

American Friends of AvH received a \$10,000 unrestricted gift from the Sidney and Nenita Yip Charitable Foundation's donor advised fund. Professor Sidney Yip, a Humboldt Research Awardee (1979) and a first-time donor, is Professor Emeritus of Nuclear Science and Engineering, and Materials Science and Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The gift was made in honor of two colleagues—Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Goetze (Technical University of Munich) and Prof. Dr. Kurt Binder (University of Mainz).

Professor Yip, or “Sid” as he likes to be called, describes himself as a “happy camper”—highly satisfied with his life and career and especially grateful for his many personal associations over the years.



### **On his time in Germany**

“My time in Germany was very special. I was lucky to have two hosts: Professor Wolfgang Goetze in Munich, and Professor Kurt Binder in Mainz, who was then a director at the Nuclear Research Laboratory in Juelich. I was in Munich in the winter. I’d always wanted to be in an old European city in the wintertime when people wore fur coats, walked their dogs around frozen ponds, drank coffee in the afternoons—this experience was memorable.

“The year I was in Munich, Wolfgang was developing and promoting a theory that turned out to be somewhat controversial. Like all things that are fundamentally earth-shaking, there are always naysayers. I was there in the early days with Wolfgang, felt that he was on a good mission, and I tried later on to do what I could to help justify and test the theory. It was a great pleasure later when I wrote a book two years after Germany, in which I put down what I learned about Wolfgang’s theory, and found Wolfgang then cited the book in his own work! Kurt is one of the most prolific scientists in our community for many years. Not only did I benefit from time spent with him, but also I got to meet several talented researchers visiting from Germany, the United States, and Asia. With both hosts, I felt a friendship more meaningful than just scientific exchanges, a special bond that is enduring and personal.

“I have a soft spot for Germany because

of my Humboldt award. I wanted to make the gift to American Friends of AvH to tell Wolfgang and Kurt that I remember our times together fondly. I’m sure that many of my fellow Humboldtians have had similar experiences.”

### **On his outlook**

“Ten years after retirement, I find myself feeling quite content. With all physical needs covered, it is time to acknowledge those organizations, programs, and people who have made my career possible. Besides the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, I have received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and I was elected to a fellowship in the American Physical Society. There are ways to say thank you to all of them. I hope I can inspire others to do the same. Perhaps one is too busy to reflect on the good associations and experiences, but once you start giving, you realize it’s such a good feeling—that it is really the right thing to do, speaking even selfishly. I think the satisfaction is similar to mentoring, whether it’s sharing knowledge, understanding, or your means.”

### **On being in a good place**

“I still have my health, some smarts, friends who respect me, and most importantly, I can hang around young people. Through the early part of my journey, I was, like everybody else, hard-charging and wanting to achieve more. Now I think first of simplicity and sensibility. I believe that at my stage, a simple and sensible life is a

good goal. I don’t need a bucket list with 50 items to check off, because checking things off a list adds stress, and it’s not worth it.”

### **On optimism**

“As an MIT ‘lifer’ who is still enjoying being engaged through various activities as an emeritus, I have observations on what it takes to succeed at an institution like MIT: you have to have passion; you have to have perseverance; you have to be bold and willing to take chances; and lastly, optimism is vital. I believe this combination can apply to anyone—people who aspire to do marvelous things even when success is not guaranteed.

“While walking down a corridor recently, I noticed a poster with a quote that expresses nicely the optimism I am feeling these days: ‘If you think something seems to be impossible, don’t disturb the person doing it.’ The world is full of people who say no, but there should also be times for saying yes! Particularly with young people, senior scientists at MIT and other institutions have an obligation to help organizations like the AvH. We all can try to be good mentors, give advice that we truly believe in ourselves. I put myself out there as someone who hasn’t done the impossible, but I’ve had a very good life. Part of this I attribute to my colleagues in Germany who decided to nominate me for the Humboldt Award. So many things are unpredictable—you never know what will happen. Why not be optimistic?”



## Featured Scholar: Professor Sabine Wilke



### Joff Hanauer Distinguished Professor in Western Civilization at the University of Washington

*As part of our alumni engagement initiative, American Friends of AvH Board and staff have been visiting alumni across the United States. Professor Sabine Wilke (STP 1996–97) discusses her Humboldt experience and its impact on her subsequent career as well as the importance of Alexander von Humboldt to her current work.*

#### ***On her time in Germany as a Humboldt Research Fellow***

“My initial experience with the Humboldt Research Fellowship was through my spouse Richard Gray, who was in Tübingen from 1989 to 1991. I accompanied him for one of those two years and gained an insight into what an important, career-defining, and career-changing opportunity the fellowship can be. As a German citizen, I had to wait a few years before I was eligible to apply to the Foundation. One also had to be under forty years of age for this particular fellowship program, so I barely made the cut when I applied and received the award at age 39!

“My mentor was the acclaimed theater scholar Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte. She was teaching at the University of Mainz and directing a graduate training program on recent developments in theater research. As a German literature scholar, this was an eye-opening experience as I learned to analyze plays not only from the perspective of written texts, but also as blueprints for live performances. All my subsequent work was forever impacted by this experience.

“The outcome of my Humboldt Research Fellowship was a book on *Ambiguous Embodiment: Construction and Destruction of Bodies in Modern German Culture* (Synchron, 2000). Several chapters deal with performance and the use of the human body in artistic installations and would not have been possible without the Humboldt fellowship. My Humboldt fellowship also played a crucial role when I was up for promotion from Associate Professor to Professor at the University of Washington—the prestige of the fellowship likely played a significant role in my receiving tenure.”

#### ***On her interest in German literature***

“German literature and culture were part of my high school education. I concentrated on both German and English during my

undergraduate studies at the University of Würzburg, but German literature and culture quickly became my main passion. I was intrigued by the narrative tradition and drama and theater. For my dissertation, I concentrated on my favorite philosopher Theodor W. Adorno and his relationship with Martin Heidegger. While fairly abstract and theoretical, this work underpinned my subsequent studies of German literature and culture.”

#### ***On “environmental humanities” and the 21st century evolution of the humanities***

“The environmental humanities connect the humanities to the sciences, social sciences, and policy and will play an important role in shaping the field. They combine interests in environmental issues—ranging from climate change, energy, and clean water to extinction, pollution, and the plight of our oceans—with questions of language and meaning. While environmental studies are rooted in the science of environmental issues, the environmental humanities translate these concerns into human questions and provide a comprehensive approach to understanding the impact humanity has on this world.”

#### ***On the impact of Alexander von Humboldt on environmental scholarship***

“Humboldt’s greatest impact on environmental scholarship is through his idea of the world as a ‘cosmos’—that individual phenomena are interconnected. He also paid close attention to how the facts of his research were communicated. Humboldt acquired that sensitivity during his travels with scientist and explorer Georg Forster through the Lower Rhine region, a project that Forster would later characterize as *Ansichten* [views] in his book.

Humboldt later titled his arguably most personal work *Ansichten der Natur* [Views of Nature]. In the book, he takes readers on a journey through Latin America, painting pictures with his words. In my book *German Culture and the Modern German Environmental Imagination*, I argue that Humboldt was instrumental in shaping the modern German environmental imagination. In Humboldt's prose, landscapes are described as if they were theatrical scenes—you see the continued influence of my encounter with performance studies during my Humboldt year, even in my work on environmental issues.

"Humboldt's other legacy was his ability to capture data in stunning visuals—whether the first scientific images for understanding climate as a global phenomenon, his detailed maps, or the many artistic renderings that accompany his scientific prose."

### ***On the continued professional and personal impact of the Humboldt Research Fellowship***

"I have maintained a life-long connection to the Foundation and the network of scholars it supports. I was able to apply for and receive financial support for publications—a great need for humanities scholars—and travel funds and made invaluable connections with other scholars that led to further collaborations. I recently spent a year at the Center for Interweaving Performance Cultures in Berlin deepening my connections to theater scholars—an experience unthinkable without the earlier Humboldt fellowship. That is the beauty behind the idea of the Humboldt alumni family—it grows and you grow with it as a scholar.

"In 2011 I was awarded the Alexander von Humboldt Alumni Prize for my proposal to build a Transatlantic Network in the Environmental Humanities—a core idea that honors Alexander von Humboldt's legacy of the importance of research collaborations. The prize helped me found a network of German and North American scholars who work on environmental topics—historians, philosophers, and literary and cultural critics—and organized a series of meetings in the United States and Germany. The impact of that network on environmental scholarship in my discipline and the environmental humanities in general was huge, as it developed into other networks and working groups that are continuing to shape the discourse to this day. Alexander von Humboldt's practices of research collaborations live on in today's research networks."

### ***On her career highlights***

"Looking back at over three decades of teaching at a number of North American institutions, I am thankful to all my colleagues and students for a wonderful time of growth as a scholar and teacher. I began my career at Stanford, where I was surrounded by fantastic colleagues and was challenged by bright undergraduates to give my very best. The University of Washington has been a great fit for my intellectual pursuits—I have been free to develop my own courses and shape my career path in ways that would not have been possible elsewhere.

"A postdoc and guest-professorship at Harvard exposed me to the challenges of teaching some of the brightest students in this country. It also gave me the opportunity to work in one of the greatest library systems and get to know New England. I am also thankful for the many grants and awards during my career.

"At present I am Joff Hanauer Distinguished Professor in Western Civilization and in that role, I am conducting a year-long research seminar with select graduate students from different humanities departments on the subject of rethinking humanism and human-non-human relations in the Anthropocene. We read and discuss core texts from the Western tradition and share projects that bring us into the field.

"All in all, I am filled with gratitude for all the enriching opportunities I had in my professional life. The relationship to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation is the centerpiece in that trajectory. I am thankful for the support they provided and for giving me the chance to develop my own voice as a scholar. I hope to pass on my love and enthusiasm for researching environmental issues in the humanities to the next generation of students and scholars."



***“The beauty behind the Humboldt alumni family is that it grows and you grow with it as a scholar.”***

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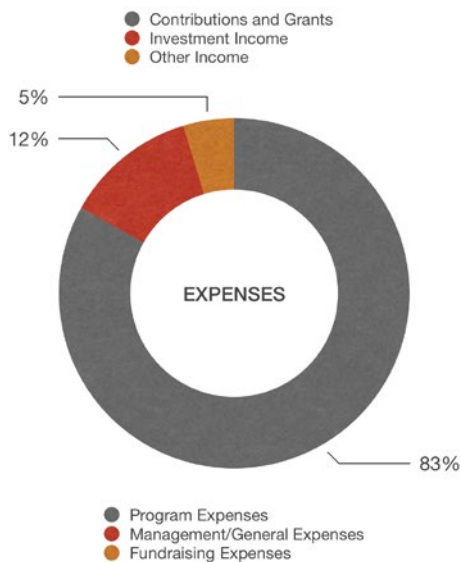
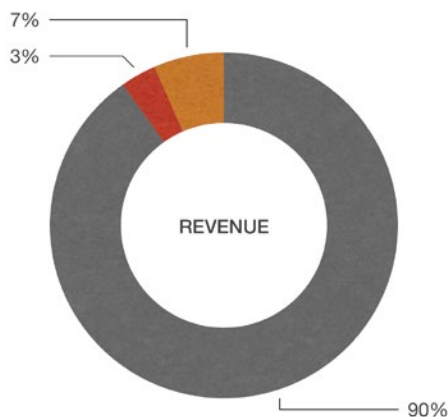
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## Alexander von Humboldt Legacy Circle Inaugural Donors



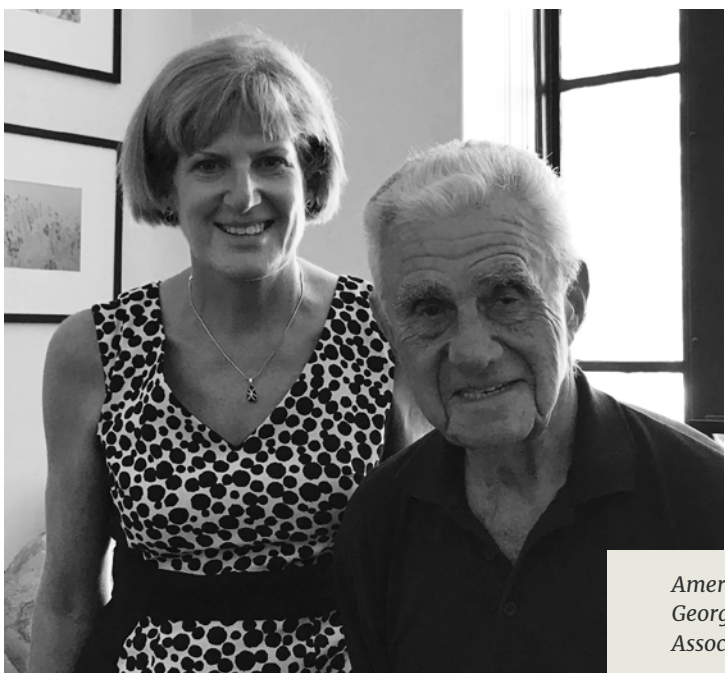
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American Friends of AvH invites you to celebrate the Humboldt ethos and experience by making a planned gift. Join us in investing in the next generation of scientists, scholars, and professionals to sustain US-German scientific and scholarly cooperation across national, generational, and disciplinary boundaries.

By giving back through your estate plan, you can leave a fully customizable legacy in a process that is simple to complete, takes little time, and costs nothing today. We honor the intentions of our planned gift donors through special recognition in the Alexander von Humboldt Legacy Circle.

To learn more about giving options, including those that may benefit both future generations of Humboldtians along with your family, contact our office at 202-783-1907 or browse our planned giving menu.

## 2019 American Friends of AvH Events



With the support of the AFAvH Alumni Council, the Center for German and European Studies (CGES), and the Institute of European Studies (IES), American Friends of AvH hosted an alumni event at the University of California, Berkeley. While there, AFAvH President Cathleen Fisher visited Professor George Leitmann (USS 1983), founding president of our predecessor organization, the Alexander von Humboldt Association of America.

As part of our commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt, American Friends of AvH cohosted events from Washington DC to California. With the German Embassy, American Friends hosted a lecture by historian Andrea Wulf, author of *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*. (Photo next page)

American Friends of AvH President Cathleen Fisher with Professor George Leitmann, founding president of the Alexander von Humboldt Association of America.

## 2020 Events

American Friends of AvH will attend the following meetings in 2020

February 8-11, 2020

Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AAAI) Conference

February 22, 2020

European Career Fair - Boston, MA

March 2-6, 2020

American Physical Society Meeting - Denver, CO

March 25-28, 2020

Scholars at Risk Network Meeting - Washington, DC

July 22, 2020

NIH Graduate and Professional School Fair - Bethesda, MD

August 23-27, 2020

American Chemical Society Meeting - San Francisco, CA

August 28-30, 2020

German Academic International Network (GAIN) Meeting - Boston, MA

October 1-4, 2020

German Studies Association Meeting - Washington, DC

October 24-28, 2020

Society for Neuroscience Annual Meeting - Washington, DC

December 7-11, 2020

American Geophysical Union Meeting - San Francisco, CA



*Andrea Wulf begins her lecture with a lively introduction of Alexander von Humboldt and his enduring legacy at the German Embassy.*

*Photo credits:*

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