Scientific breakthroughs inspire news stories, inflame political debates, and inform healthcare providers—ffecting all of our lives on an intimate level. Yet most people only get a taste of science in high school classes and do not understand scientific concepts critical to understanding health and the well-being of society, and, more generally, to making sense of the world around us.

“We would like to change that,” said Partha Mitra, Crick-Clay Professor of Biomathematics at CSHL. This goal drove two institutions, CSHL and The New York Public Library’s Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL) to team up and launch a new series, Science Soirées: Conversations on Science and Society.

“The idea,” explained Partha, who conceived of the series and serves as moderator at the events, “is to expose non-scientists to fundamental scientific concepts that could affect their lives and provide them with a foundation for informed decisions and further exploration.”

The conversation series—which is free and open to the public—was kicked-off on Monday, February 12, with a talk by CSHL’s own Tim Tully, a neuroscientist who spoke on work that has motivated him for over 20 years: understanding how the brain stores and processes memory. Tim's talk, “The Future of Memory: The Biochemistry of Memory and Its Future Enhancement,” intrigued the crowd of more than 150 who were encouraged to ask questions over wine and cheese in the Library’s expansive Healy Hall, located at 34th Street and Madison Avenue in New York.

The Soirées feature prominent scientists from CSHL and elsewhere, speaking on timely topics in modern research and technology. In addition to the first event’s conversation on memory, leading researchers will discuss genetically modified foods, recovering from brain injury, energy sources of the future, and the origins of language.

Kristin McDonough, Robert and Joyce Menschel Director of SIBL, was thrilled to join forces with CSHL to help inform citizens, expand science literacy and interest in the community, and provide a venue for non-academic discussion of scientific topics. “Science Soirées will further SIBL's mission reaching a broad community with information about science and technology that is sometimes difficult for people to access on their own,” she said.

The Soirées not only provide a forum for the public to engage in informal conversations with scientists, but also offer an opportunity for young professionals based in New York City to share their interest in science with like-minded people in a friendly setting. The refreshments and ample networking time are crucial elements to the program. During the Soirées, scientists mingled with attendees before and after the talk and Q&A segments, serving to tear down an artificial barrier that often arises between scientists and non-scientists.

“There is a great need to foster conversations between scientists and the general public,” said Partha, who noted he was inspired by Britain’s famed Faraday Lectures. In the nineteenth century, Michael Faraday, an English chemist and physicist who contributed significantly to the fields of electromagnetism and electrochemistry, gave popular lectures on subjects such as the chemistry of a candle flame. The talks continue to this day in his honor to present cutting-edge technology in an interactive format. To expand on CSHL’s broad educational mission, the Science Soirées aspire to welcome anyone who was ever fearful of or bored by science to take a closer look at what all the excitement is about. Kiryn Haslinger

See Upcoming Events for schedule