Alan Alda asks scientists to explain: What's time?

FRANK ELTMAN Associated Press

MINEOLA, N.Y. (AP) -- Professor Alan Alda has a homework assignment for scientists. Yes, that Alan Alda.

The actor known for portraying Capt. Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce on the TV show "MASH" and more recent guest shots on NBC's "30 Rock" is also a visiting professor at New York's Stony Brook University school of journalism and a founder of the school's Center for Communicating Science.

The center is sponsoring an international contest for scientists asking them to explain in terms a sixth-grader could understand: "What is time?"

Alda is well-known for his affinity for science and is the longtime host of PBS' "Scientific American Frontiers." He said it is vital for society to have a better understanding of science, and puts much of the onus on scientists to better explain their work.

"There's hardly an issue we deal with today that isn't affected by science," Alda said. "I've even heard from a number of people in Congress that they often don't understand what scientists are talking about when they go to Washington to testify, and these are the people who make the decisions about funding and policy."

He said many scientists have told him they have to get better at communicating.

"We see misinformation about scientific facts on a daily basis," Alda said. "Sometimes you know so much about something you assume everybody else is as familiar as you are and you tend to speak in shorthand. Even other scientists may not understand what you are talking about if they are not an expert in your field."

This is the second year Alda is supporting what he calls the Flame Challenge II. The name comes from his own experience as an 11-year-old, when he asked a teacher what a flame was. She replied, "oxidation," which left him just as puzzled.

So, last year he asked scientists to answer his childhood question via a contest administered by the Stony Brook center.

The center received more than 800 submissions from around the world, and the winner chosen by 6,000 student judges was Ben Ames, a 31-year-old Kansas City native studying for his Ph.D. at the University of Innsbruck. He created an animated video (http://bit.ly/YJXdwV [1]) explaining how clashing atoms create fire.

This year, Stony Brook received 300 questions from 11-year-olds and settled on a

query submitted by Sydney Allison, a sixth-grader at Gomm Elementary School in Reno, Nev. Entries can be submitted until March 1. The winner gets a trophy, a trip to the 2013 World Science Festival in New York and the satisfaction of educating not only sixth-graders, but the general public.

"This contest probably gives people the impression that it's a teaching tool for kids," Alda said. "That's a happy by-product, but it really is a tool for scientists to take a complex question and explain it in a way the rest of us can understand."

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