

Actor Alan Alda sponsors 'fiery' science contest

March 6 2012, by Kerry Sheridan



American actor Alan Alda, pictured in February 2012, has launched an international science contest, with 11-year-old kids acting as the judges

American actor Alan Alda remembers the disappointment of being 11 and asking a teacher about the flame at the end of a candle, only to be brushed off with the answer: "It's oxidation."

So decades later, the celebrity who rose to fame on the 1970s-80s [television series](#) M*A*S*H has launched an international [science](#) contest to seek answers to that very question, with 11-year-old kids acting as the judges.

"We're asking scientists to answer the question -- 'What is a flame?' -- in a way that an 11-year-old would find intelligible and maybe even fun," said the contest website at flamechallenge.org.

Of course, Alda is not only just looking for the answer to his long-ago question, he is also trying to promote better [science communication](#) in all realms of life.

In an editorial in [Science magazine](#) last week, the now 76-year-old Alda wrote about his memories of that interaction, and the realization he has come to as an adult that poor communication can have dangerous consequences.

"That was a discouraging moment for me personally, but decades later I see the failure to communicate science with clarity as far more serious for society," he wrote.

"Scientists have recognized for some time that there is a harmful gap in understanding between their work and much of the rest of the world -- one that can hold back scientific progress."

Alda is a founding member of the Center for Communicating Science based in the School of Journalism at Stony Brook University in New York, where he is also a visiting professor.

The contest is being run by the center, and has already received 100 entries in its opening days since March 2, including some from Brazil, New Zealand, Australia, Britain, [Saudi Arabia](#), India and Lebanon, a spokeswoman told AFP.

Contest entries can come from anywhere in the world, and university staff is working with US teachers to form a judging panel of 10,000 US kids.

Entries can be written, on video, or in graphic form. The deadline to enter is April 2, 2012.

The winner will get a T-shirt and free VIP passes to the World Science Festival in New York in June.

"So here I am -- I'm 11 years old and looking up at you with the wide eyes of curiosity. What is a flame? What's going on in there? What will you tell me?" Alda wrote in Science.

The university said it hopes to hold another such [contest](#) next year, and that it will ask the children who participate as judges to pick the next big question.

"The more people we can get involved in this conversation about science, the better," said Valeri Lantz-Gefroh, workshop coordinator of the Center for Communicating Science.

"I think it is a great story that Alan told. I think we have all kind of been there, in a situation where we weren't engaged in a powerful way. People recognize the importance of this."

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