

Physicist balances waves with world of science

by Brad Melekian

To hear him tell it, Garrett Lisi is a pretty typical surfer.

"I've always been in the ocean, since before I could walk," he said by e-mail. "I turned 16 and got a VW bus, which I used to prowling the breaks around Encinitas (Calif.). I've been hunting waves ever since."

BALANCING ACT - 'Surfing acts as a great 'reset' button for whatever I'm worried about in the rest of my life,' says physicist Garrett Lisi. CNS Photo courtesy of Garrett Lisi. His surfing bona fides are legit, his measure of commitment best proven by the fact that he lives in a van in Hawaii six months out of the year. Among his best adventures, he lists sessions at the big wave break of Teahupoo in Tahiti before it became the Gold Standard for heavy water surfing; a drive down the Pacific Coast of Mexico; and years spent at unmentionable spots in the islands.

But Lisi, 39, a physicist who earned his doctorate from the University of California San Diego, made headlines recently not for his surfing, but by publishing an online paper called "An Exceptionally Simple Theory of Everything," which was reported in *New Scientist*, and serves as a unifying theory of the universe.

Though it has yet to be proved, the theory has gained traction among some in the scientific community as having great validity, while being derided by others. But it's Lisi's unique position as a physicist outside the scientific main that has garnered the most attention.

Lisi says that UCSD's proximity to the beach enhanced his education in its own way.

"It allowed me the opportunity to balance surfing and physics, and I've continued that balance through the rest of my life. I think balance is very important."

With no steady job, Lisi lives in the van in Hawaii half the year to keep himself close to the surf and stays in Reno, Nev., the other six months to snowboard, all while working on his science.

"I try to get to Maui every year to surf, but don't currently have a place to stay there, except for the van," he said. "I love the water and islands of Hawaii, but I also love the serenity and austere beauty of the mountains - so I often move between the two."

Garnering much attention for his most recent theory, Lisi has been painted by some with the stereotypical "surfer dude" brush. Inside the scientific community, however, Lisi says he's had no such problems.

"If the math is right and the physics is good, that's all scientists care about," he said. "It's a wonderfully unbiased community - all that matters is ideas. And physicists are used to eccentric personalities."

To that end, Lisi is unabashed - to his colleagues or anyone else - about his passion as a surfer. He says that in its own way, it's contributed to his scientific thought.

"Surfing acts as a great 'reset' button for whatever I'm worried about in the rest of my life," he said. "If I'm struggling with a difficult physics question, focusing on approaches that aren't going anywhere, surfing allows me to get away from the problem - after surfing, I'm able to come back and start fresh and find an answer I might not have found had I continued with the previous approach."

And like that, Garrett Lisi is a very typical surfer.

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