Five questions for Alexander Soifer[1]

When asked to explain how he chose to immerse himself in the fields of mathematics, art and film history, Alexander Soifer easily answers: “I am a student of Beauty in all her manifestations.”

The UCCS professor grew up in Russia, moved to Colorado for the mountains, and has been making his mark on the university for 36 years. He founded the Colorado Mathematical Olympiad and is president of the World Federation of National Mathematics Competitions. In 1990, he was chair of the university’s Privilege and Tenure Committee. He spent several years as a visiting scholar at Princeton University and Rutgers University and is editor and publisher of Geombinatoricsresearch quarterly.

Soifer said he was honored to be able to team-teach UCCS classes with two honored film directors, who he invited to the university: Yuri Norstein, whose film “Tale of Tales” has twice earned the title of “greatest animated film of all time” from panels of international judges; and Andrey Zvyagintsev, who has won numerous international honors, including a 2015 Golden Globe for “Leviathan.”

He’s the author of many books and hundreds of articles. His current work includes “Problems of pgom Erdös,” a book about “the greatest problem creator of all time, and also friend, coauthor, and mentor,” Paul Erdös, who personally selected his favorite open problems for the upcoming publication. A book about the third decade of the Olympiad and another about his memoirs are in the wings.

Next month, a chapter written by Soifer will appear in the Cambridge University Press publication “Topics in Chromatic Graph Theory,” and John Nash at Princeton (“A Beautiful Mind”; Nobel Prize, 1994; and Abel Prize, 2015) has invited him to write a chapter in a book about famous unsolved problems of mathematics.

“I have some percent of a rebel’s blood,” he said, referring to his writing and to life in general. “I don’t follow the rules that my mind doesn’t accept as reasonable. In fact, I take delight in violating unreasonable rules.”

1. You were reared and educated in Moscow. How did you come to be at the University of Colorado?

At the point of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, I was awakened as a social person. I realized that I am responsible for what my country does on my behalf. I found myself to be a free man in a country that cannot stand free thinkers. So, there were only two honest choices: climb on barricades or get to an airport.

America is much, much better, even though you also pay for criticizing your boss here. I am simply willing to pay that price.

When I first came to the U.S. in 1978, I taught at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. I survived the first winter and then I applied to probably 100 universities and got three offers. Pessimists would say that’s very low, a 3 percent return; optimists would say, “How many jobs can one accept”?

I didn’t accept the obvious choice to stay in Boston; I was eager to see the country so I had to choose between Colorado Springs and the University of California at Los Angeles. I was interested in the mountains and came here in 1979. I’ve been here for 36 years.

2. How did you choose a career that focuses on a mix of math, history, art and film?

My father was an artist – a painter – and my mother, an actress. Beginning at age 6, I went to a music school for eight years. At age 14, my choices were math or music.

School math did not attract me any more than school biology or history – it was just another discipline. But my math teacher in the sixth grade spent four Sundays taking me to the Moscow University Mathematical Olympiad. Our school was Monday through Saturday, so she accompanied me to the competition during her only free time. The competition didn’t test practical knowledge; it gave you an opportunity to show your creativity. After that, the choice was easy for

me: mathematics' fun puzzles vs. music, which by then I knew was slave labor with never a day off. My parents were displeased at first. By ninth grade, I went to a magnet math school but I continued with music school so if I wised up, my hands would still be ready to play an entrance exam for music college. Later in high school, my main interest shifted to visual arts. I am an artist at heart, and treat mathematics as an art as well.

In Moscow, I didn't like the lack of human rights and I didn't like that my life was predetermined to my tombstone. But by 1988, I began to feel that once again I was pigeonholed in the College of Engineering. I rebelled a little bit and moved to arts and sciences. I applied for a Colorado Endowment for the Humanities grant to focus on Russian studies and to my disbelief, I got the grant. I brought together professors from Boulder, the Colorado Springs campus and Colorado College to talk about things like Soviet-American relations, Russian history and Russian literature. I talked about one of my greatest passions – Russian Avant-Garde of the Early 20th Century. After that, I was asked about teaching a course for the art department.

My first art course was in '89 and I have been teaching art since. A week ago, my course on "Emergence of Infinity in Arts and Sciences" was approved. It's an interdepartmental course and on May 8 will be considered by a campus-wide committee as a course that counts for every major on our campus.

3. You founded the Colorado Mathematical Olympiad at UCCS, and the 32nd event just wrapped up last week. Why did you start this competition and what is its mission?

I was a straight-A student. It was easier to get all A's than explain to my mother why I got a B. And only the Moscow State University Math Olympiad showed me the beauty and humor of mathematics. Somebody created the Olympiad for me and now I am passing the baton to the next generation. Previous winners of my Olympiad are now professors at Penn State, Ohio State (both in math), the University of Southern Cal (philosophy and law) and Berkeley (astronomy).

The mission is to show the kids – and society – that achievement matters not only in football. And to tell individual kids that they have the talent – they just must develop it and contribute to the culture. The Ohio State professor, Mathew Kahle, was a C- student at school; he needed me to tell him that he was good. He won the Olympiad for two straight years. The Berkeley professor, Aaron Parsons, came from Rangely, Colorado, which is not exactly a place famous for top education, but he won first prize in the Olympiad and was accepted by Harvard and then Berkeley.

I created the Colorado Math Olympiad in 1983-84. I actually wanted to create it the moment I came here in 1979, but there was no enthusiasm from my fellow mathematics professors. In '84, I asked my number theory students if they would like to join me in creating this and about 75 percent of my students volunteered.

The years have been a rollercoaster. There were times when I had to fight deans for the survival of the Olympiad, but my current chancellor is a strong supporter. We had about 330 students compete this year, and for the first time, a girl won first prize. Sarah Gao is an eighth-grader. This is amazing because the questions are the same for all middle-school and high-school competitors. Another girl, Anjalie Kini, also an eight-grader, won second prize. This was really a transformative year. Their work was excellent. The judges don't know who the authors are; we grade the papers under code, and so it was a delight to see the girls do so well. This is also only the second time in 32 years that a middle-school student has won first prize. It's very exciting.

4. Your new book, "The Scholar and the State: In Search of Van der Waerden," was released a few months ago. Why did you choose Bartel Leendert Van der Waerden as a subject?

Lots of books are written about heroes and villains, but the majority of people are in between. And so I chose an ordinary person, even though he was a great mathematician, and traced how the Nazi tyranny forced him to accept compromises with his conscience, as did his famous friend, Werner Heisenberg, who won the Nobel in 1932 and later was the scientific head of Nazi atomic research.

In 2009, my book "The Mathematical Coloring Book: Mathematics of Coloring and the Colorful Life of its Creators," was published. In all, Springer – the publisher – signed 10 book contracts with me. Seven books are out, and one of the other three will be my memoir, "Memory in Flashback: A Mathematician's Adventures on Both Sides of the Atlantic."

I have written more than 300 articles and 11 books, but “The Mathematical Coloring Book” and “The Scholar and the State,” which took 18 years and 20 years respectively to write, and the Colorado Mathematical Olympiad are the most important things I have done. I can say this is why I was born to the world. Most mathematicians and historians write very boring scholarly books: It’s all theorem-proof, theorem-proof. I like my books more in the style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: I’m Sherlock Holmes and I invite you, my reader, who is Dr. Watson, to join me and investigate something. I use the first person unapologetically because I don’t think there is anything in this world that is really objective. I believe in perspectivism as Nietzsche defined it: We don’t have a fact; we have various perspectives on that fact.

5. Do you have an object or artifact that is special to you?

In my office, I have two of my father’s – Yuri Soifer (1907, Vinnitsa, Ukraine – 1991, Colorado Springs) – paintings. One is a Jewish cemetery that used to be his set design for a 1928 play in Odessa, and the other is his abstract work, “Electronic Music.” In 1972, in Moscow, I found a couple of my father’s small set designs in his portfolios. I loved them so much that I asked him to enlarge them and make them into large graphic art. So, the cemetery hangs in my office, and the other one, “Smiling Through the Tears: Sholem Aleichem” (the author of “Fiddler on the Roof”), is sitting on my late father’s easel in my home studio, which I built for him with my own hands in 1982 (I did not yet write books then, so I had the time to build).

Plan comparison tool helps simplify medical plan choices[2]

Choosing benefits is not easy, especially when University of Colorado employees can choose from several high-quality options. Understanding available medical plans can take a lot of effort during a busy time of the semester. That’s why Employee Services created a plan comparison tool this Open Enrollment.

Employees may use this tool to determine the best plan for their needs before Open Enrollment closes at 5 p.m. Monday, May 11.

CU offers benefits-eligible, active employees four health plans. Depending on an employee’s health and individual considerations, each plan offers a variety of useful benefits. The new plan comparison tool breaks down plan components and allows employees to easily compare each plan in order to make the best choice possible. This new tool shows various elements of each plan side-by-side, so employees can easily understand the possible benefits.

For example, this screen shot shows the comparison of the out-of-pocket limit for each plan.
[3]

The comparison tool also covers facts such as the type of plan, deductibles, where each plan is available, prescription and emergency coverage and more.

The tool is designed to show information about many aspects of each plan. For example, employees who might need health care outside of Colorado can easily see which plans are available throughout the United States. Which plans require a referral for specialty care? This tool simply shows the answer, cutting through any complicated benefits documents.

“This tool allows employees to compare coverage and costs side-by-side before they have to go to the detailed summaries to find the information they need to make their final decisions,” said Michelle Martinez, director of Benefits and Payroll Administration at CU Employee Services.

Find the plan comparison tool at http://www.cu.edu/employee-services/medical-plan-comparison[4]. For more information, contact Employee Services: 303-860-4200 (option 3) or benefits@cu.edu[5].

Law firm commits $500,000 to be split between CU, DU law schools[6]
[7]

Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck announced a $500,000 gift to be divided between the University of Colorado Law School (CU) and the University of Denver Sturm College of Law (DU). Each school will use its $250,000 gift to create an endowed fellowship program. This gift is the single largest gift from a law firm in the history of both universities.

“Our goal is that these endowments enable each university to create a unique fellowship program that simulates a real world legal environment for students, allowing them to gain beneficial hands-on experience and ultimately making them better attorneys,” said Adam Agron, co-managing partner at Brownstein. “At the same time, our endowments support two exceptional law schools from which so many of our lawyers have graduated and from where we continue to recruit our next generation.”

When it comes to law schools, nearly 30 percent of Brownstein’s attorneys are alumni of CU (35 attorneys) and DU (36 attorneys) including Agron (DU) and Bruce James, former managing partner (DU), as well as Norm Brownstein (CU) and Steve Farber (CU), founding members of the firm and current members of the firm’s executive committee. In addition to these two law schools, the firm also supports several other law schools across the country.

These fellowship programs demonstrate an innovative and collaborative approach between the public and private sector to support the next generation of attorneys creating a bridge for law students between school and practicing law.

“Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck is a special firm in the pantheon of Colorado Law. Founded by graduates of Colorado Law, the firm, with all of its successes, its tradition of supporting public service, and its national reputation, is a point of pride for the law school,” explained Phil Weiser, dean of the University of Colorado Law School. “We are just delighted that the firm is ‘paying it forward’ in this very impactful fashion, supporting our students gaining valuable experience over the summer and serving the public.”

The University of Colorado Law School has an established summer public service fellowship program that provides summer stipends to students working in the public sector. As the program has grown, Colorado Law has been able to provide stipends to all students working in summer public service jobs. At current stipend rates for public service work in Colorado, this investment will provide distributions to support five such stipends every summer, creating a class of “Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck Fellows,” who can benefit from the firm’s generosity and contribute to the firm’s legacy of supporting public service.

“Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck continues to be a tremendous partner,” said Martin Katz, dean at Denver Law. “The firm’s support of this program is a win, win. Our students gain valuable experience, and the Colorado-based corporations where students are placed will receive great legal work within their general counsels’ offices.”

The Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck Fellowship at Denver Law will expose students to the culture of an in-house legal department and enable the Fellows to better understand the unique needs and circumstances of corporate clients. This program, combined with the schools focus on experiential learning, will ensure graduates are ready to hit the ground running in private or in-house legal practice.

DU will begin its fellowship law program as early as fall 2015 and CU will begin to implement its fellowship law program in 2016. DU’s fellowship will focus on the private sector and CU’s fellowship will focus on government.

Boettcher grants $175,000 to UCCS arts complex construction[8]
[9]

The Boettcher Foundation has awarded a $175,000 grant to support the construction of a new arts complex at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs.

The Ent Center for the Arts will be a transformational, five-venue arts complex representing a partnership among the university, six community arts partners and three local school districts. The Ent Center will house performance and exhibit spaces including a 750-seat main theater, a 250-seat recital hall, the Galleries of Contemporary Art, the university's Dusty Loo Bon Vivant Theatre and the Osborne Theatre.

"We are deeply appreciative of the continued support of the Boettcher Foundation," Chancellor Pam Shockley-Zalabak said. "This kind of private support is vital to the university's mission to improve the quality of life for southern Colorado."

Groundbreaking for the arts complex, estimated at $60 million in total costs, is scheduled for August with opening scheduled for early 2018. The venue site is located on the west side of the UCCS campus on North Nevada Avenue across from University Village Colorado shopping center.

"The Boettcher Foundation is honored to support a shared space where the community can celebrate the arts, and UCCS's outstanding arts faculty can pass on insights to a next generation of artists and performers," said Tim Schultz, president and executive director of the Boettcher Foundation. "This arts complex will have a huge impact both economically and culturally on the Pikes Peak region."

The Boettcher Foundation invests in the state's most talented citizens and high-potential organizations with the belief that supporting their hard work and leadership will enable them to give back for years to come. For information, visit www.BoettcherFoundation.org[10].

CU-Boulder announces three finalists for vice chancellor for research[11]

CU Foundation meets on campus[12]

'Ambron Knowledge Exchange' conference room, interim dean announced at fundraiser gala[13]

New clinic aims to smooth the bumpy cancer treatment road[14]

New UCCS head women's cross country coach selected[15]

Corey Kubatzky has been named head coach of the UCCS women's cross country team and of the distance and middle distance track and field teams. He has served as interim head coach since January.

"I am very grateful for the opportunity to work with student-athletes who have set a high level of expectation both

academically and athletically," Kubatzky said. "UCCS is gaining much deserved recognition as one of the best schools in the state and region and the athletic department has the potential to continue to rise to the highest levels of Division II. I am excited to be a part of, and contributing to, this progress."

Kubatzky was a graduate assistant with the Mountain Lions from 2008 through 2010. He worked with the steeplechase runners and the women's distance runners, including developing training plans, strength work and proper form.

After he earned his master's degree in education with a focus in leadership, Kubatzky worked with the Hansons-Brooks Distance Project as an assistant coach. He joined Hansons Coaching Services and moved into the role of director of operations in 2012 where he managed a staff of five assistant coaches.

Kubatzky earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy-neuroscience-psychology from Washington University in St. Louis in 2008. While a member of the cross country and track and field team, Kubatzky also worked as a recruiting coordinator from 2005-08.

Hart wins prize for microscopic photography[16]

John Hart, a professor of atmospheric and oceanic sciences at CU-Boulder, recently won third place in the fourth annual Nikon Small World in Motion Photomicrography Competition, which features time-lapse footage taken through microscopes.

Hart won the prize by recording how oil evaporates and coalesces on the surface of water. His work on "complex microscopic fluid dynamics" could be useful to researchers studying the longevity of oil spills.

To see the video, visit http://www.nikonsmallworld.com/galleries/swim/2014-small-world-in-motion-competition[17]

UCCS celebrates faculty, staff at Campus Awards[18]

Outstanding faculty and staff were recognized during the UCCS 2015 Campus Awards Ceremony on April 29. The awards and honorees included:

Kraemer Family Library — Campus Sustainability Award**; Eric Olson**, professor, College of Business, and director, Sport Management Program — Chancellor's Award; **Tom Napierkowski**, professor, Department of English — Surprise Chancellor's Award; **Benek Altayli**, director, University Counseling Center — Outstanding Staff Award;

Christopher Bell, assistant professor, Communication Department — Faculty Award for Outstanding Contribution to Diversity & Inclusiveness; **Catherine Kaukinen,** assistant professor, School of Public Affairs — Faculty Award for Excellence in Research; **Suzanne Cook**, senior instructor, Department of Languages and Cultures — Outstanding Instructor Award;

Sonja Braun-Sand, assistant professor, Chemistry and Biochemistry Department — Outstanding Teacher Award; **Sabine Allenspach**, instructor, Biology Department — SGA Student's Choice for Educator of the Year; **Suzanne Byerley**, associate professor, Kraemer Family Library — Faculty Assembly Award; **Robert von Dassanowsky**, professor, professor, Department of Languages and Cultures and Department of Visual and Performing Arts — Thomas Jefferson Award; and **Andrea Herrera**, professor, Women's and Ethnic Studies Program — Chase Faculty Community Service Award.

In memoriam: Sherman Miller[19]

Sherman Ralsey Miller IV, executive director for the Real Estate Center at the Leeds School, died April 22. He was 64.

He was born April 17, 1951, in New York City and grew up in Tucson, Arizona, where he swam competitively and coached swimming. Miller graduated from the University of Arizona and moved to Colorado in 1979 to pursue a career in commercial real estate. He was an icon in the commercial real estate industry winning numerous awards for his leadership and management skills.

Click here to read the Denver Post's obituary[20].

In memoriam: Beulah Scott Sawyer Stone[21]

Beulah Scott Sawyer Stone, a longtime staff member at CU-Boulder, died May 1, 2015. She was 88. Click here for details on upcoming services and to read her obituary[22].

Links
[1] https://connections.cu.edu/spotlights/five-questions-alexander-soifer[2] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/plan-comparison-tool-helps-simplify-medical-plan-choices[3] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/es-oe_plan-comparison-600x269.jpg[4] http://www.cu.edu/employee-services/medical-plan-comparison[5] mailto:benefits@cu.edu[6] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/law-firm-commits-500000-be-split-between-cu-du-law-schools[7] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/cu-law-gift_top.jpg[8] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/boettcher-grants-175000-uccs-arts-complex-construction[9] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/boettcher-gift-arts-complex_uccs_top.jpg[10] http://www.boettcherfoundation.org/[11] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-boulder-announces-three-finalists-vice-chancellor-research[12] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-foundation-meets-campus[13] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/ambron-knowledge-exchange-conference-room-interim-dean-announced-fundraiser-gala[14] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/new-clinic-aims-smooth-bumpy-cancer-treatment-road[15] https://connections.cu.edu/people/new-uccs-head-women-s-cross-country-coach-selected[16] https://connections.cu.edu/people/hart-wins-prize-microscopic-photography[17] http://www.nikonsmallworld.com/galleries/swim/2014-small-world-in-motion-competition[18] https://connections.cu.edu/people/uccs-celebrates-faculty-staff-campus-awards[19] https://connections.cu.edu/people/memoriam-sherman-miller[20] http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci_27982180/cu-real-estate-center-chief-sherm-miller-has[21] https://connections.cu.edu/people/memoriam-beulah-scott-sawyer-stone [22] http://www.darrellhowemortuary.com/obituaries/2015-05/beulah-scott-sawyer-stone