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Reporting & Writing / 201-1
Professor Waldron
29 October 2013

Event Story
Tweet: Northwestern University's Dearborn Observatory gets up-close and personal with the stars
Headline: Dearborn Observatory gets up-close and personal with the stars

Just a few minutes after 8 p.m. at Dearborn Observatory, 14 guests – made up of families with small children, elderly couples, and a few students – were greeted and briefed on the history of Dearborn before heading to the dome for an evening of stargazing Friday.

The greeter, Sara Rastegar, 32, a graduate student in the department of Earth Sciences from Iran was one of the night's telescope operators along with 31-year-old Astronomy graduate student Marc Royster from Riverside, Calif.

"I think just in general the history of this building and the telescope is really cool. Most people on campus don't know this building exists. Like when I tell people I'm going to class at Dearborn they don't know what I'm referring to," said freshman Kalli Koukounas, 18, a Weinberg freshman from Demarest, N.J.

The first two floors of Dearborn were uncomfortably warm, but upon entering the dome, a chill set in. A rectangular slit opened in the ceiling of the dome to allow the telescope to peer into the night sky, but the breeze came right through it and the air was just as cold as it was outside. A set of red lights circle the dome to help to preserve your night vision while stargazing.

During the private viewing session, guests got to see Uranus, which is 3 light-hours away and 20 times farther from the sun than Earth is, as well as a double star cluster that is 7,500 light-years away and was formed about 12 millions years ago.

“I like it when people come in with questions and they like to see particular things because then I get to talk about the things I like the most in the sky,” said Rastegar. “Kids are always fun to have because they always ask a lot of cool questions and they want to know if I think Pluto is a planet or not.”

When about seven guests arrived for the walk-in session, however, it began to get a bit cloudy and they were not able to see much. Despite the fact, Stan McConner, 55, a member of the Weinberg class of ’79 from Evanston, Ill., still said:

“This is the best show in town! You can go to a movie, you can stay home, you can go bowling, but you get a chance to look at your future by looking at your past because the light out there took a bazillion years to get here,” McConner said.

“And it’s free,” added his wife, Angela McConner, from Buenos Aires, Argentina. The McConners have been coming to Dearborn for the past three or four years.

To the visitors, everything appeared to run smoothly – at least until the clouds rolled in. What they did not see was the half an hour of prep before the private viewing session that did not go according to plan.

“Tonight was actually pretty strange. The tracking on the telescope wasn’t working so the computer kept thinking that the telescope was going too low and it was just emergency shutting it off so we had to keep resetting the computer to reboot it and so that took longer than usual,” said Royster.

The computer does most of the work, but first the operators need to tell it which star to point at. Once they find a bright object to point the telescope at, the computer syncs to the object and keeps track of it.

While seeing Uranus and a double star cluster is really interesting, Royster advised coming back to the observatory in December and January when guests will get the chance to see Jupiter.