

Heavenly News

“Becoming an Observatory Docent”

By Kyle Schaeffer, CPRC Community Observatory Docent

As Observatory volunteers we get asked a lot of questions; it just goes with the territory. “How far away is that star?” “Is Pluto really a planet?” Or a six year old wondering “How come it's dark at night?” We certainly don't know all the answers but that doesn't stop us from trying. We listen, we explain to our best ability, and hopefully we inspire a bit. No inquiry is too small and we never get tired of answering the same questions (“No, the green laser is for docents only”). I will say this, one of our favorite questions – and one that we never get tired of hearing - is “How can I become a docent?” We get a little excited when that one is heard.

As with any community service organization, it really is the volunteers who make it run. The donation of time is elemental to what we do. In the past six-plus years of existence we've never failed to staff the Observatory for a public viewing night. We're proud of that fact but it isn't easy when you consider the many directions we all get pulled in from time to time. It's just that we have some very dedicated docents determined to keep the doors open and we're always on the lookout for more folks eager to share their passion for astronomy - even if you don't have any experience! I should know...

Occasionally visitors inquire about my personal qualifications, some of them assuming I need to have a degree in something to be a docent or at least a few classes under my belt. Or my personal favorite is when a visitor will casually say that, “you must work at Aerojet or something like that.” No, that's not the case (but if they're hiring let me know!). You don't need a piece of paper to prove you have a brain (my apologies to the Scarecrow). I never finished college and I currently work as a pest control technician. I'm essentially a 15th year sophomore who kills bugs for a living so I'm totally qualified to explain stellar evolution, right? Is now a good time to mention I don't even own a telescope? It's not what you have; it's what you pursue (aspire to?) that makes the difference. I didn't know much beyond elementary school astronomy before I became a docent but I've come a long way.

Since joining the team I've essentially audited a dozen or so courses in astronomy from places like Ohio State and UC Berkeley and listened in on countless topical lectures delivered by leading scientists through podcasts. My job requires me to drive a lot, so while you and I might be stuck in the same traffic jam I may as well be in another time zone learning about cosmic inflation. If the Science Channel is featuring something about the universe it's likely landing in my DVR. I read the periodicals. The information is *everywhere*. And, of course, I've learned so much from just hanging around the Observatory listening to far more intelligent folks than myself. That's where it began for me and that's where it can begin for you too.

If you have a desire to learn and pass on what you've learned, we have a place for you. If you take the time to fill out a docent application, we have a badge waiting for you. If you can commit to working just two nights a month (four hours total), we have a telescope for you to steer. If you want to play a part in inspiring strangers to look up in wonderment, we have an audience for you.

If you'd like to take your turn answering questions you thought you'd never know the answers to, we have a community for you. We hope to see you out there. To learn more about the Cameron Park Rotary Club Community Observatory go to www.communityobservatory.com.