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Eyes on the skies: UC Irvine telescope has viewing parties

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By **SHERRI CRUZ** / ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

One of college student Jessica Walker's favorite childhood memories is when her family would get up in the middle of the night to go see an astronomical event.

"There's a meteor shower, get in the car!" her father would say, and off they would go to Joshua Tree National Park.



Mark Steyvers and 5-year-old daughter Lia were among the first to arrive for visitor night at the UC Irvine Observatory. The visitor nights are open to the public.

CHRISTINE COTTER, FOR THE REGISTER

She was reminded of that memory as she waited on the Lyrid meteor shower at the UC Irvine Observatory during Visitor Night on April 21. About nine times during the year, UCI opens its observatory to the public.

The university's Department of Astronomy & Physics puts on the events, which are free to the public. The main attraction is the 24-inch diameter Ritchey-Chrétien telescope, which allows visitors to view astronomical objects such as planets and galaxies.

Visitor Night comes in two varieties, formal and informal. Formal nights are held Saturdays. The next one is June 1, when Saturn will be featured.

Informal visitor nights take place when there is a major astronomical event such as the Lyrid meteor shower April 21.

Some visitor nights are crowded, with up to 500 people in the summer months.

The crowd April 21 was relatively small, with about 100 people. Visitors got to gaze at star clusters through the telescope until around midnight.

Irvine residents Mark Steyvers and his daughter, Lia, 5, arrived early so they could get an early peek inside the observatory.

"This is the first time that we'll manage to get in," Steyvers said.

The observatory is looking for funding to add more visitor nights, which cost about \$2,000 each night.

Visitor Night began in 1997 when Tammy Smecker-Hane, director of the observatory, was convinced by two members of the campus astronomy club to give it a whirl. About 150

UCI Department of Physics & Astronomy

Founded: 1965

Faculty: 45 members, including 11 astrophysicists (physicist- astronomers)

Degrees offered: Bachelor's degree in physics, with optional specialization (minor) in astrophysics; a master's degree in physics; and a doctorate degree in physics. The department plans to add an astrophysics concentration for the doctorate program in 2014-15.

Summer fun: The department offers an Astronomy & Astrophysics course for the California State Summer School for Math & Science, a summer program in which high school juniors and seniors

cloudy. It is canceled only when it rains.

•**Cost:** Free, but a \$5 donation per family is suggested.

•**Where:** A left turn onto the gravel road just past the corner of California Avenue and Gabrielino Drive in Irvine.

•**Parking:** On the formal Saturday events, check the UCI Observatory website. Parking on informal nights is alongside the gravel road leading up to the observatory.

•**Attendance:** 400 visitors on average.

•**Main telescope:** 24-inch diameter aperture Ritchey–Chrétien telescope.

•**Website:** <http://ps.uci.edu/~observat>

the particles of gas in the atmosphere," he said. "They're essentially moving so fast that the temperature is hot enough to make that gas glow."

How fast? Meteors move at 45,000 mph, according to astronomers.

On formal visitor nights, Smecker-Hane sits at the observatory entry and answers questions.

"Where else in Orange County can you go to talk to an astrophysicist?" she said.

She gets a lot of questions from children. "If you spend 10 minutes talking to them, it can change their opinion of what they want to do when they grow up," she said.

It happened to her, she said.

She still remembers her high school physics teacher, who taught classes in an engaging way

through experiments.

"He turned everybody on to physics," she said.

Smecker-Hane can also talk about one of the most well-known astrophysicists today, Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York.

"We had this winter school in Switzerland where we were the only two Americans, so we got to know each other," she said. "He's very personal, very bright, a real educator," she said.

On formal visitor nights, local amateur astronomers also get in on the fun. They set up their telescopes around the dome to share the view with visitors.

Visitor Night attracts people from all over Southern California.

The Harms family drove up from Riverside. It was a surprise trip for Julie and Paul Harms' two young children, Garrett and Serenity.

The Harms children are home-schooled. Their parents hoped the visit to the observatory would be a fun way to supplement some of what they had been learning about astronomy.

Serenity brought up an often-neglected point about spring time Visitor Nights. "It's freezing out here."

Walker, who attends UC San Diego, was there with friends Axel Arredondo and Lauryn Mascarenas, who go to UCI. Arredondo is studying business, economics and political science. Mascarenas is studying psychology and social behavior.

"It's really cool that they open it up for us to come see," Mascarenas said.

Contact the writer: scruz@ocregister.com

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