

Countdown to Astronomy Day

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“If there were a million amateur astronomers with telescopes, and they were willing to let a few thousand people each look through their telescopes, there would be a chance for all the people in the world who wanted to see to see.” —John Dobson

For the last four decades, astronomy superstar John Dobson has worked to popularize his passion, bringing the simple pleasures of the night sky to anyone willing to look and listen. He’s famous for standing on busy sidewalks, inviting passersby to gaze through his homemade telescope. By engaging the public in this once unorthodox manner, thousands of people—many of whom had never even seen a telescope before—have been able to experience the wonders of the telescopic night sky firsthand. Though the observing might be lousy from a city street corner, sometimes the briefest glimpse of the Moon’s craters or Saturn’s rings can be enough to spark a lifelong interest in astronomy.

Dobson wasn’t alone in his philosophy of taking astronomy out into the community. In 1973, Doug Berger—one of Dobson’s friends and a fellow co-founder of the Astronomical Association of Northern California—came up with the idea for Astronomy Day. Its formal goal: “bringing astronomy to the people.” By setting aside a special day each spring for public outreach, amateur astronomy organizations found that they could make a huge difference in their community’s awareness and knowledge of astronomy (and have fun doing it). Clubs were rewarded for their efforts in more tangible ways, too, as neophyte stargazers—inspired by what they saw at Astronomy Day events—joined up, thrilled to spend time with others who shared their newfound interest. Public night attendance at observatories also grew, as word spread in the community about what interesting things all those “telescope people” were up to.

It didn’t take long for Astronomy Day to catch on and spread throughout the United States, and as decades passed, it grew into an international affair. The Grand Rapids Amateur Astronomical Association—always open to trying new ideas, and committed to the West Michigan community—has been celebrating Astronomy Day with public outreach events for decades. Some of my own initial experiences with the GRAAA happened at local shopping mall displays run by club members in the 1980s. It wasn’t long before I was fully hooked on astronomy, and working at some of those booths myself.

Last year, the GRAAA and Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium teamed up to host a successful display table at the Grand Rapid Public Museum (with telescope demonstrations, solar system models, games, and take-home activities), and this year we’ll be carrying out an even more

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extensive program. Astronomy Day will officially take place on Saturday, April 28th, but we'll be hosting an entire series of events, spanning multiple days at a variety of locations, all leading up to a grand night of observing at the James C. Veen Observatory.

A few of this year's Astronomy Day programs are still being finalized at the time of publication, so please check the Association's website (www.graaa.org) for updates and further details. If you'd like to help out, or if you have any questions about Astronomy Day, please don't hesitate to contact me personally. Whether you have a telescope that you'd like to show off, have a special astronomical interest to share, or just want to spend a few hours chatting with people about the sky, your help would be appreciated. Together let's create an Astronomy Day event that even John Dobson would be proud of; one that gives everyone in the West Michigan community a chance to experience the wonder, majesty, and intrigue of the starry universe around us.

[Graphic: tentative schedule of events, contact information]