

A stellar setting for stargazing

August 16 2012, By Rick Rojas

The summer sunset has painted a vivid watercolor of orange, coral and violet over the Pacific, just past the pier in Seal Beach. But Michael Beckage already has his telescope trained on the moon.

Even in this light, the moon is bright and crystalline, like a salt mine with dimples and ridges. Yet Beckage hardly has a moment to take a peek. Instead, a little girl perches on a stepladder to squint into the eyepiece, a line forming behind her.

"Do you see the holes in the moon?" Beckage says, pointing out the craters. "Do you know what they're called?"

He tells the little girl to put her eye as close as she can. She cups her hand around the eyepiece and smiles as she takes it all in.

Beckage knows what she's experiencing. It's the moment he had as a 10-year-old, when his neighbor called him over to look through a telescope for the first time. He saw the moon, marveling at its contours in such detail - and that ignited a lifelong fascination with all there is to behold in the universe.

"This winds up being the most fulfilling thing I do in life: sharing a telescope," Beckage says. "It's exciting to see people's sense of wonder sparked by a telescope. This kid might do something with this."

Beckage comes monthly to this patch of grass between the water and Seal Beach's Main Street, with its restaurants and bars. He picks a night

when conditions are right - the sky clear, the moon visible - and sends out an email blast to local amateur astronomers.

At his "star parties," Beckage and the other [amateur astronomers](#) set up their scopes at dusk and stay late into the night. Like Beckage, the others don't come just to see for themselves but to give anyone who happens by a chance to take a look.

"Very few people have looked through a high-quality telescope," Beckage says. "The feeling of looking through a high-quality telescope is contagious."

So he brings his telescopes to them. With a partner he met at a seminar in Cerritos, Calif., about 10 years ago, he goes to classrooms, nature walks and Girl Scout meetings. During the transit of Venus, he set up in a parking lot at Leisure World, where seniors watched intently for hours as the dot of a planet trudged across the sun's surface like a snail on a sidewalk.

On this evening, a handful of people have gathered in the Seal Beach park, and Beckage waits for each to have a chance to see the moon. Then, he eases his massive orange telescope a few clicks to the right.

He zooms deeper into the solar system and focuses on the gas giant Saturn three planets away.

"Saturn is a planet that thrills everyone who looks at it!" he says.

It doesn't take long for the sun to sink below the surf. The moonlight reflects off the ocean and the night sky fills with stars.

It's unusually chilly for a summer night, but the crowd isn't deterred. There are families with children, teenagers with their friends, retirees strolling. They notice the telescopes as they pass by, and that's how Beckage pulls them in.

Throughout the evening, they amble up to his scope, a few at a time.

I can really see the craters on the moon!

Saturn really does have rings around it!

Many take a peek and move on, but some hang around and ask questions. Some even promise to come back.

Steve Liivoja, 50, is one of those who keep coming back. The Cypress, Calif., resident grew up thinking astronomy was boring. But one day Beckage invited him to look through his telescope, and he was amazed. That was three years ago, and he's been coming almost every month since.

"I got transformed in one night," Liivoja says.

A cluster of stargazers have made the parties part of their routine, some coming since they started in 2007. Every month they'll plop down on a single spot for hours on a Saturday night. They know what to look for and even help Beckage explain the images in the scope to the newcomers passing by.

The regulars say they are drawn by the vastness of the universe. It's humbling, they say. Spiritual, even. Nothing puts things in perspective like seeing Saturn - a planet that could fit 763 Earths inside of it - rendered like a thumbnail-size slide in a View-Master.

"Your ego vanishes here," Liivoja says, "because you're just a tiny speck in this gargantuan mass."

Another regular, Cheryll Thomas, 64, remembers that her interest was first piqued in the sixth grade when she did a report on a constellation. She picked a small cluster called Lyra.

"I could never get enough of the sky, and I lived in the Midwest, so I could see it," Thomas says. "I'm just in awe of the Milky Way."

Curt Schneider, a fellow amateur astronomer, first saw the stars through a neighbor's telescope in Cerritos. The neighbor later helped him build his own, even helping him grind the mirror for it. He was 12, and hooked.

Together, Beckage and Schneider have become evangelists for the cosmos, traveling in their spare time across Southern California with a telescope open for anyone to use.

Beckage, 53, co-owns a Seal Beach-based electronics development and manufacturing company. It's a time-consuming job, he admits. Astronomy has become an escape for him, one both thrilling and relaxing at the same time.

Beckage, who is married and has no children, serves as a volunteer board member at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Ariz., teaches astronomy classes for various city parks departments, including Long Beach, and organizes stargazing events for schools and other groups.

"I never cease to marvel at the beauty, and there's the science of knowing what's out there," Beckage says.

"There's always something to learn. Any time I learn anything about the

universe, it's exciting. Our knowledge in astronomy has advanced so much since I was a kid."

In terms of stargazing, the ocean-side park is far from ideal. The lights from the pier and from an oil rig off the coast cast an amber glow, polluting the view. The wet air condenses so quickly that Beckage repeatedly has to pull out a tiny hair dryer to blast drops of water off the lens.

But considering that the goal is to draw as many people as possible, the spot couldn't be more perfect.

The crowd changes as the night goes on. The children and families wrapping up a day at the beach are replaced by couples on dates and packs of friends drifting over from the nearby bars. Curfew has chased off the teens on skateboards.

Brenda Jiminez, 37, has come from Stanton, Calif., on a date with her husband. They were walking down Ocean Avenue when they spotted the telescopes.

"That is so, so awesome!" she bellows just after she has a glimpse of Saturn. "I've never seen anything like it. It's really, really neat!"

Manan Bhatt, who has come down from Long Beach, carefully aligns the camera on his iPhone with the eyepiece and starts taking pictures. A dusty gray moonscape in sharp detail fills his screen.

With each person, Beckage patiently explains the science of the cosmos. His eyes are still wide with excitement. He doesn't seem irritated at all by their questions, even the simplest ones. Do the sun and the moon look

alike?

A young couple stroll up. Beckage shows them a constellation in the Southwest sky. He pulls out a high-power laser pointer with a beam so bright it looks as if he's poking the stars with a mint-green light saber.

"In 20 years, some of the photons from the laser will hit that star," Beckage explains.

"It's mind-boggling," the woman replies.

Midnight approaches. The sounds of people are slowly being replaced by the hum of night and the crash of waves.

The crowd is mostly gone, and the streets of downtown are clearing out. Most of the telescopes have been packed.

But Beckage hangs back. One last person wants to see the stars.

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