

New donor found to help save planetarium effort

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 04/20/07

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TOMS RIVER — Burned by one anonymous donor, Robert J. Novins Planetarium supporters say they have now a bona fide benefactor offering to match donations to the Save the Planetarium Fund as a way to ratchet up public involvement.

Donations will be matched for up to \$500 each — effectively doubling their value — according to this donor's pledge, said fund President Richard Gamba, whose group is kicking off their drive Saturday at the annual Astronomy Day open house at Ocean County College.

"This person approached me very interested in getting the planetarium going again . . . and getting the (elementary school) kids back into the planetarium," Gamba said.

The donor is structuring the offer in a way similar to the "challenge grants" frequently used to motivate listeners and viewers of public radio and television.

For anyone pledging money to the planetarium, "he'll match them, dollar for dollar," Gamba said.

The matches are limited to donations from individuals and youth and school groups, Gamba said.

"He is initially committing up to \$50,000," Gamba said. "We're hoping others will follow his lead. The ultimate goal is to get as many of the public involved as possible."

Unlike Edward Devine, a supposed benefactor whose background and financial status were bogus, this donor has been in the community for years, although he wants to duck any wider publicity, according to the planetarium group.

"He is known to me personally, and several other people in our organization know him well," Gamba said.

The donor also has entered a written agreement with the fund to guarantee the pledge, he added.

The Novins planetarium on the college campus is where schoolchildren have been introduced to astronomy and space sciences since the mid-1970s. Amid frequent technical breakdowns, college officials finally decided to close the star theater last September, thinking that a donor eventually would help reopen it with a \$2.5 million pledge.

This winter college officials found out that Devine, who purported to be chief executive of a major transport firm, in reality owned one tractor and a few trailer boxes, and had nowhere near the financial means to assist.

In the weeks since, area astronomers and longtime planetarium volunteers organized the Save The Planetarium Fund. The college's board of trustees recently announced its own fund-raising drive that will kick off in early May.

Astronomy Day activities run from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the college, followed by an evening of "open telescopes," during which members of the Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area set up their instruments for public viewing of the heavens.

Daytime activities will be in the Solar Lounge in the student center and the college cafeteria, he said.

Later, "it should be a perfect night," Gamba added. "Saturn will be out, and Venus, and a thin crescent moon."

Donations can be sent to the Save the Planetarium Fund, 1001 Fischer Blvd. No. 103, Toms River, NJ 08753.

Information is available at www.savetheplanetarium.org — the group's Web site.

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