

## Astronomy Day also a fundraiser

### Group trying to save planetarium

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BY ZACH PATBERG  
MANAHAWKIN BUREAU

TOMS RIVER — Like River City in the 1950s Broadway story, "The Music Man," Ocean County College encountered its own smooth-talking Professor Harold Hill last year and paid a hefty price.

By the time Edward Devine, a self-described trucking firm tycoon, was exposed as having no intention of giving the \$2.5 million he promised to revive the school's planetarium, college officials had lost crucial fundraising months. The Robert J. Novins Planetarium, already crippled by failing equipment and state funding cuts, closed in September.

Lesson learned.

Since then, supporters have wasted no time plotting fundraising efforts and building enough community backing to convince the college that the planetarium is worth saving. And while they have again agreed to collaborate with a philanthropist, this time they're certainly not putting all their bets on a promise.

Instead, the Save the Planetarium Fund used the annual Astronomy Day at OCC Saturday to kick off its money drive.

"When we found out the donor was a fraud, we got together and decided to have people's voices heard," Sarah Waters, 41, co-founder of the fund, said of harnessing public support.

In a room labeled the Star Lab, piles of shoes lay next to an igloo-shaped, blow-up dome into which children crawled to catch a glimpse of the night sky — a portable substitute for the giant space theater formerly housed in the planetarium.

In another room, a member of the Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area, which hosts Astronomy Day, was showing an audience of children how to brew up a comet: a precise mix of dry ice, organic matter (corn syrup) and interplanetary dust (garden dirt).

Melissa Edmons, 20, an OCC student, stood watching her half-brother Matthew Strang-Wolf, 4, in a chef hat, put on oversized rubber gloves to handle the dry ice. She said she has already sent in her application to volunteer with ASTRA.

"We need this planetarium," she said. "People come from all over to see the shows. I used to when I was little and I can't imagine these kids not having the same chance."

Across the room, the grown-ups sat quietly listening to Richard Gamba, vice president of ASTRA, lecture on telescopes. Others brought their own star-gazing toys in for another ASTRA member, Bob Salvatore, 52, to explain what all the gadgets mean.

"I'm here to see if it works so I can check out stuff in the sky," said Vinny Donena, 15, a Toms River High School East freshman who got his Galileo refractor telescope two years ago.

Salvatore himself has been an amateur astronomer for about 12 years. Through his 12-inch LX200, he is able to see some of his favorite objects: a pair of galaxies 25 million light years away that he has named The Leopard's Eyes.

By 1 p.m. Saturday, about \$1,500 in cash donations had been raised as hundreds of people filtered through the exhibits and activities. The event was to carry on into late evening, when telescopes were to be set out pointing skyward.

The hope is to reach \$50,000, which would then be matched by an anonymous donor who Gloria Villalobos, planetarium director, assured was "well-known and credible."

Villalobos described the effort Saturday as "more about grass roots and public awareness. The trustees are better for the big donors and finding those deep pockets."

Last week, the college board of trustees announced a plan to raise \$1.5 million from grants and donations to renovate the planetarium.

In the end, supporters say, it's all about keeping the interest in the stars well-nourished.

"You just have to have the yen to look up," said Gene Russio, 62, a Ph.D. chemist turned blacksmith who lectured at the planetarium for six years. "Then you can't help but wonder what's up there."

**ON THE WEB** Visit our Web site, [www.app.com](http://www.app.com), and click on this story in the Ocean section for a link to: Save the Planetarium Fund.

*Zach Patberg: (609) 978-4582 or [zpatberg@app.com](mailto:zpatberg@app.com)  
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