

## Teens raise money for stellar cause

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

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TOMS RIVER — Students at Toms River High School South who surprised supporters of the Robert J. Novins Planetarium with a fundraising drive got a little surprise of their own: Their donations totaling \$573 will be nearly doubled.

"They didn't have the matching fund started yet when we got organized," said science teacher Jim Luyster, whose homeroom class started their impromptu fundraiser after being frustrated at being unable to visit the now-closed star theater at Ocean County College.

An anonymous donor is matching contributions by youth and school groups to the Save the Planetarium Fund for up to \$500 — meaning the donations from High School South students, teachers and families will actually pull in \$1,073, Luyster said.

Fund president Richard Gamba said the matching grants — the donor has promised up to \$50,000 in all — will similarly boost donations from last night's benefit concert by Toms River Regional School District musicians at the district's Ritacco Center. It's part of a drive to raise up to \$1.5 million to refurbish and reopen the Novins planetarium, the auditorium that Luyster and his students remember as a central experience when they were in elementary school.

"We thought we were going to the planetarium, but we found out we were going to save it," explained Courtney Felton, 18, of Beachwood.

The students said they were kicking around ideas for a science field trip when someone mentioned the planetarium. Most remembered trips there when they were younger, being introduced to astronomy.

"I went to Hooper Avenue Elementary and I can remember going to the planetarium," Luyster said. "It was 1977 or '78, right when "Star Wars" came out."

But Luyster's students found out they wouldn't be refreshing those memories because the planetarium had shut down in September after repeated equipment failures.

"We were appalled," said Briana D'Iorio, 18, of Toms River.

"We were upset because all the elementary school children wouldn't have the same experience we had," said Ashley Lefevre, 18, of Toms River.

In a few days, the class came up with a fundraising plan. They printed fliers and prepared a script for morning announcements on the public address system, complete with the opening theme from the "Star Wars" films. Taking advantage of the first homeroom period — about 20 minutes early in the 7:20 a.m. to 1:40 p.m. academic day — they broke up in teams and visited other homerooms to solicit donations, Felton said.

In all, it took about eight days of promotion among the 1,750 student, collecting money in homerooms and hallways and hitting up relatives, said Nelson Saez, 15, of Beachwood.

"Our idea was not so much the money as the thought, and to show the community the students care about the planetarium," Luyster said.

The high school earth science classes include a semester of astronomy principles, students said. From their own childhood memories of the planetarium, they can appreciate its power as a teaching tool.

The high school has a projector that casts star charts to familiarize students with the constellations, "but it's not a real planetarium," said Christy Tate, 18, of Toms River.

Visiting a planetarium "gets people really excited. If you look at it in a book, it's just dots on a chart," Felton said.

The Ocean County College Board of Trustees and the OCC Foundation last week announced plans for more fundraising efforts, including a summer gala expected to bring in at least \$250,000. Meanwhile the Ocean County Board of Freeholders has committed to paying the bill for structural work and upgrades to the planetarium building on the OCC campus, Freeholder Director John P. Kelly said.

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The entire student body at Toms River High School South is made up of the greatest bunch of young adults in the the state. This is just another fine example of how great Toms River South is. I'm so proud that they are WHO they are.

Posted by: facefacts on Thu May 10, 2007 10:04 am

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