



August 12, 2008

Planetarium, donor still worlds apart

MONEY NOT GIVEN TO OCC

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After years of being stuck in a financial black hole, the stars may be finally aligning for the Robert J. Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College.

Over the next 10 months, an estimated \$3.5 million will be spent to refurbish the landmark star theater, the building on campus that resembles a giant, white hatbox. It is where most children raised in Ocean County during the past 34 years likely had their first close-up glimpse of the heavens.

"You know something? What I'm looking forward to are two things: Not only the opening day, I am looking forward to the day when our students go back into the planetarium . . . to look at their faces," said Joseph H. Vicari, a county freeholder.

But getting there has been something equivalent to a moonshot, and the journey is far from over.

First, there was the case of Edward J. Devine, the charismatic do-gooder who pledged \$2.5 million from his make-believe trucking empire to save the iconic structure. The problem was Devine owned only one truck, and had a rap sheet going back to 1984 with a history of masquerading as people of wealth and importance. He is now behind bars, serving a five-year sentence for part of his deception.

Today, college officials fear another fundraising crisis on the horizon, this one in the form of "Save the Planetarium," a nonprofit organization formed in the wake of Devine's fraud.

We may have a problem

The group, led by Richard Gamba, a local T-shirt designer and space buff who belongs to a group that calls itself the Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area, purports to have raised as much as \$45,000 for the planetarium.

But so far, OCC officials have not seen a dime of that touted revenue, though the college foundation's official "Reach for the Stars" fundraising campaign ended in March.

Gamba's group broke off contact with the college administration at about that same time, according to Tara B. Kelly, vice president of college advancement. Now officials are starting to ask pointed questions.

"No contact, not since March," Kelly said. "We're hopeful that Save the Planetarium is continuing to raise money, and we're looking forward to them donating it. . . . (However) the planetarium has been saved, so to speak, and we're ready to move ahead with active fundraising for an endowment to help us keep it running for future generations. And we would love to accept Save the Planetarium's donation for that purpose."

Gamba said the college foundation will get the money after his group finishes its fundraising on its timetable — not the college's — and has agreed on how the revenue will best serve the planetarium.

"Well, I mean, it's very interesting, their attitude here of — you know — "Where is their money?" kind of thing," Gamba complained.

"We didn't necessarily just want to throw the dollars into a general pot; we never said that we were going to do that, you know, from the beginning," Gamba said. "Yes, we're collecting money to help save the planetarium, but, the intent was — and this is what has happened — was for us to motivate the college and the trustees of the college, and the people with influence, for them to do the real fundraising, for them to find the money to keep the planetarium. And that's exactly what they did."

After the disappointment of the Devine hoax, Gamba gathered 1,000 signatures on a petition to ask the college not to close the planetarium and he successfully lobbied the county Board of Freeholders to intervene. The board agreed to appropriate \$2 million to make major renovations, and the college foundation will pay for the technology at a cost of \$1.5 million.

Before Devine offered his bogus pledge in May 2006, the college had announced its intention to close the planetarium permanently as a cost-saving step in response to a \$1.2 million budget shortfall from the state for the community college.

"If the freeholders didn't do it, it wasn't going to happen," Vicari said. "And you know something? It was the right thing to do."

War of the words

Kelly, the OCC vice president, said the building provided no instructional space when it was constructed in 1974 and was costing OCC about \$300,000 to operate each year, despite its 30,000 annual visitors. The planetarium, the only one of its kind at the Jersey Shore, was frequently visited by children, who came to "ooh" and "aah" at the light show in organized class trips each school year.

Gamba contends the college administration under President Jon H. Larson was more than happy to see the planetarium go and still does not want it.

"They don't make it easy," Gamba said. "None of this has been made easy. There are so many things that could have occurred to make that easier. It's a simple fact: They don't want the planetarium. They never did. They tried to close it. And we stepped in and prevented that."

"That couldn't be further from the truth," Kelly replied. "The college has always enjoyed having the planetarium. It's a very important part of our campus; it's a very important part of our community."

Gamba said his group wants to use a significant portion of its funds to install a live feed from NASA called ViewSpace, which would be televised on two plasma sets in the renovated lobby. The permanent exhibit — Internet-based and self-updating — broadcasts data and pictures received at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, where operations for the Hubble Space Telescope are managed.

But Kelly said the money for the equipment has already been earmarked.

"We were hoping to use (Save the Planetarium's) money for the equipment, as he had originally stated," Kelly said. "But considering that he didn't come forward with his donation in time for that purchase, even though he was made aware of the deadline and he chose not to (respond), we were able to go ahead with the generosity of our other donors."

Communication blackout

Kelly said the college is concerned that if Gamba has raised \$45,000, there are donors out there who have given to his organization under the pretense that the money was earmarked to save the planetarium, as the name of Gamba's group states.

In fact, because the college believed Gamba's fundraising was in tandem with the official campaign of the college foundation, Gamba was allowed to participate in high-level meetings about the planetarium, Kelly said.

"Mr. Gamba, as a representative of that organization, was involved in the planning process at an unprecedented level for someone who doesn't work at the college, because he was being so supportive and generous with us," she said.

Kelly said the administration was aware there would be some confusion over the dual fundraising campaigns.

"They're never going to give me my way on anything, I realize that," Gamba said. "It's just a simple matter. We have these donations — we're waiting. We're still collecting money. I'm not going to be turning anything over (yet), we're not done with the fundraising."

Gamba said his organization had raised between \$40,000 and \$45,000, but conceded he could not be specific and indicated that much of his fundraising represented pledged donations rather than actual cash on hand.

"We're happy to accept any donation Save the Planetarium would like to give to the college on behalf of their organization," Kelly said. "We certainly don't want to fight with (Gamba), we don't want to have any kind of big drama, we don't want to shame him or whatever, we just want to know exactly what the deal is."
