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Stargazers invite public to join them Friday at Westampton center

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By Jessica Molz Correspondent

CHERRY HILL — On a clear, dark night, you won't find the members of the Willingboro Astronomical Society catching up on their beauty sleep. They'll be out under the stars, watching planets and snapping photographs, charting constellations, and teaching others how to do so, too.

"We're very passionate about the night sky," said club president Drew Maser, 62. "Our primary goal is to educate the public on amateur astronomy — spark some interest."

The Willingboro Astronomical Society was founded in 1967 by three 13-year-old boys whose passion for exploring the cosmos led them to form an organization where they could share their interest with others. Today, it has grown to support a large active membership and numerous stargazing activities, all open to the public.

"We host evening star watches, and we meet up twice a month for one formal and informal meeting," said vice president Jerry Lodriguss, 61.

Society meetings include group discussions of the latest astronomical events, and the occasional presentation by a member on a different astronomy-related topic.

"A lot of people like to share what they do," Maser said. "Someone will say, 'Hey, I saw this, did anybody notice this?' and everyone will start talking and searching the Internet for pictures."

Even more excitement than normal was in the air at recent meetings as the New Horizons space probe neared Pluto, bringing back the first high-resolution images of this distant dwarf planet.

"We had been talking about it ever since (New Horizons) started getting close," said Lodriguss, a professional photographer who formerly worked at The Philadelphia Inquirer. "Everybody was pretty amazed."

Member Steve Mattan, 55, found the images “fascinating, beautiful and awe-inspiring with respect to what it took to get them.”

The next big event for the Willingboro Astronomical Society will be Astronomy Night on Friday at the Rancocas Nature Center in Westampton. To celebrate the opening of three new gardens, the Nature Center will host an evening of stargazing amid the gardens’ unique natural beauty. Society members will be on hand to provide telescopes and offer guidance on the night sky.

“We’ll show the public the moon, the planets,” Maser said. “When people look at Jupiter and Saturn — even though they’ve seen pictures before on the Internet — when they see it through a telescope with their own eyes, that’s when you get the oohs and the aahs.”

Those oohs and aahs are what fuel the organization. Even seasoned members still speak of the awe they feel looking up at the vast starry sky.

“I love astronomy, because of the larger perspective on life it gives you,” Lodriguss said. “How enormous the universe is.”

“New discoveries continue every day,” Mattan said. “New Horizons at Pluto, planets around other stars, the accelerating universe — how can one not be amazed about what were a learning about our place in the universe?”

The first Star Watch/Astronomy Night will be held at 7:30 p.m. Friday at the Rancocas Nature Center at 794 Rancocas Road in Westampton. For more information, call 609-261-2495 or visit <http://www.rancocasnaturecenter.org>.

The Willingboro Astronomical Society meets on the first and third Friday of every month at 7:30 p.m. at the Resurrection Catholic School at Christ Our Light Church (formerly St. Peter Celestine) at 402 N. Kings Highway in Cherry Hill. For more information, visit <http://www.wasociety.us/>.

For examples of Jerry Lodriguss' photographs of the night sky, visit <http://www.lodriguss.com/>.

Email: mconstantino