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## FEATURE

### For the Love of Saturn

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Armed with odd-looking telescopes, fancy binoculars and contagious enthusiasm, they usually set up camp around dusk. Then, they talk about Saturn and its magnificent rings while waiting for the proper moment. Once their target is in sight, they point and fine-tune their instruments. Then they finally share their eyepieces, and the shows begin.

They are the members of the Saturn Observation Campaign, an endeavor of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory to promote space exploration and prime the public for the deluge of stunning images and scientific data that the Cassini-Huygens spacecraft will send once it arrives at Saturn in July 2004.

In 2002, the inaugural year of the campaign, 140 space fans answered the call. They come in all shapes and forms, live across the five continents and probably have little in common other than their passion: to share their love for space observation. They held meetings in cities and rural areas alike and showed the common person how beautiful the ringed planet really is. And if the sky happened to be cloudy, they enlightened their audience about the wonders of the universe or build paper models of planets and spacecraft.

Their stories are as different as the languages they speak. But their enthusiasm is contagious.



Amazing Saturn event held in Australia.



Noeleen Lowndes

### Looking up from Down Under

In Australia's Gold Coast, some 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) from Sydney, Noeleen Lowndes is often seen near the town's library surrounded by eager children and just-as-excited grownups. While people take turns peaking through the telescope, she speaks about Saturn and its rings and tells of the mysteries they hold. Librarians on the Gold Coast say that books on astronomy are now in high demand.

A carpet retailer by day, Lowndes' passion for astronomy skyrocketed almost overnight.

Like mothers often have to do, she spent many nights awake while her three children were growing up. The strenuous schedule meant many opportunities to go outside and look up at the sky. Her life changed when an unforgettable sight made her rush to find pencil and paper.

"One morning at 3:00 a.m. there was a fantastic sight before my eyes: The whole eastern sky was ablaze with multi-colored starlight with magnificent star groups in beautiful patterns," she recalls. "I just had to know what they were called!"

She started devouring astronomy books, and even had to turn many of them upside down to adapt them to the Southern hemisphere. She studied the sky for months and soon afterward bought a telescope capable of taking pictures of the stunning views she was enjoying.

Lowndes' space-related speaking career began a few years later with a show-and-tell appearance at her daughter's first-grade class. The daughter was eager to show her teacher and friends the photographs of the Moon her mummy had taken. The classmates' interest made her realize that there were many others as excited as she was about celestial objects.



"All their faces were lit up with smiles and they all had so many questions," she says.

Jeremy Hartley, a second grader at Upper Coomera State College in Queensland, Australia, brings his own telescope to Saturn Observation Campaign events.

Lowndes is now the secretary of the [Southern Astronomic Society Inc.](#) on the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia. She now owns more than one telescope, and she posts some of her best photos on the society's Web pages.



Edy Bevk

Bevk complied, and soon he started to share his love for astronomy -- and his telescope's eyepiece -- with anybody interested. It was a natural thing, he says, that last year he answered the call to join the Saturn Observation Campaign.

After he joined the campaign, he noticed how many children attended his observation meeting.

"Children give me such a response," Bevk says. "It's a marvelous experience. It's interesting to hear the old questions of mankind uttered through the mouths of our kids."

The 73-year-old Bevk is now polishing his Slovene language skills. With the aid of slides, he'll soon give a lecture on Saturn in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia.

### Setting Up Telescopes Among Windmills and Tulips

On the other side of the world, her campaign's colleague Edy Bevk shows the beauty of the ringed planet all over the Netherlands. While the view is the same for everybody, he can tell the story of Saturn in Dutch, German, English or French.

Always enamored with astronomy, Bevk became a full-time mentor after he retired.

It all started when Bevk turned 65. His mother gave him 1,000 guilders and told him to buy a telescope and enjoy what he loved so much. Mrs. Bevk figured that her son, who spent his life teaching German in his native Holland, had talked long enough about Doctor Faust. Now, it was time for him to look for himself "what's hold together the whole bunch."



Edy Bevk checks the instrument at the Europlanetarium in Genk, Belgium.



Matthew Ota, center, at JPL's Open House.

### Back in California

Closer to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the NASA center that built and manages Cassini, Matthew Ota is one of the 16 Saturn Observation Campaign volunteers based in California.

A craftsman and sign designer by trade, Ota has had an interest in astronomy and space exploration since he was 12 -- back in the days of the Moon landings.

Growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, he frequently corresponded with the Public Affairs Office at JPL. After moving to the Los Angeles area in 1980, he became a regular visitor to JPL's Open House events and lectures. After rediscovering observational astronomy and purchasing a telescope in 1998, he is now sharing this telescope at a record pace.

"My motivation is to inspire today's youth in the fields of astronomy and the space program because when I was at that age in the '60s a teacher inspired me," he says. "I like to think that one of the children that I can reach today will be the first person to set foot on Mars."

These days, Ota also volunteers as a telescope operator with the Telescope In Education foundation at the Mt. Wilson Observatory. At JPL's Open House events, he brings his telescope to show visitors the hidden beauty of the Sun -- rather than Saturn, which is visible only at night.

### How to Join the Saturn Observation Campaign

The campaign is open to amateur and professional astronomers. To join the campaign, volunteers must have access to a telescope and electronic mail. Enthusiasm is a must too. The requirement is to host a minimum of three events within a year. Volunteers will be able to participate in on-line trainings and programs conducted by JPL.

The campaign gives astronomers an opportunity to share their knowledge and passion for space exploration with their communities. Partnering with local organizations, volunteers will use their imagination to hold fun and educational activities -- whether by organizing viewing events, giving lectures or coordinating hands-on activities.

The application window for the 2003-2004 campaign is open from July 1 to August 29, 2003. The opportunity to participate will be repeated every year. For more information, see <http://soc.jpl.nasa.gov/>.

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