

Dudley returning to sky-gazing role

'Telescopes sucker people into science'

BY KATHLEEN MOORE
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For 30 years, no one has been able to see the stars from the Dudley Observatory.

But the long wait is nearly over. Within a year, observatory directors plan to move to a new location, set up a research-quality telescope, and reopen as the only public observatory in the Capital Region.

Researchers packed away the observatory's powerful telescope in 1976, refocusing on astronomy education and setting up a museum with the observatory equipment. The museum moved several times before opening in

Schaffer Heights on Nott Terrace.

There, the observatory's education program drifted back to stargazing. Executive Director Janie Schwab has been handing out telescopes to teenagers, teaching them how to use them and then running star parties and school programs with their aid. They get to keep the telescopes once they prove they know their way around the sky.

The program is designed to entrapure students, who may then decide to study astronomy in college.

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Janie Schwab, executive director of the Dudley Observatory, talks about one of the observatory's portable telescopes.

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science," Schwab said. "You get every science: geology for the planetary stuff. Chemistry and physics for travel, biology for extraterrestrial life."

So that's why it's good for kids. Why do they like it?

"It's a real 'wow' experience. You never forget the first time you see Saturn through a telescope," Schwab said. "And you don't have to be a professional. You can do this at home. Astronomy is one science where amateurs can really do research."

Next year, they will be able to do research with the observatory's new telescope. It will be run by a professional, likely someone with a doctorate in astrophysics, but the director will focus on running public viewing events and helping students do research, Schwab said.

Three local colleges already run observatories, which are primarily for the use of their students. The Dudley Observatory would offer public viewing every week and encourage high school students to begin research, Schwab said.

She doesn't yet know where the new observatory will be. It may not be in Schenectady; she is negotiating leases with three property owners but declined to say where those sites are located.

But she added that city light pollution isn't a problem for modern telescopes.

"With modern technology

they can subtract out the light with digital imaging," she said. "And for public viewing, you're looking at bright objects anyway."

Operating in a city could also be an advantage, she said.

"It's important to do things in the city because that's where the people are," she said. "We're looking in the Capital Region. We want to be in a place where people can easily get to it, but where we also have regional coverage; the local astronomy community has really become regional."

The observatory is collecting donations for the move, but is largely supported by grants. Money is not likely to be a problem, Schwab said.

"We are in pretty good shape. We rely a lot on volunteers. We

may do in-kind work, might have faculty members running programs," she said.

Until then, the programs will have to remain outdoors. The observatory works with the Albany Area Amateur Astronomers group, which will run a star party tonight and Saturday night from 10 to 11 p.m. The parties will be held at George Landis Arboretum in Esperance.

The group will also hold a sun-viewing party at Indian Meadows Park in Glenville at 1 p.m. Aug. 5. The group will provide special filters; a glance at the sun through a telescope without safety equipment could blind the viewer.

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