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Crowd enjoys season's first UIS Star Party

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For the Fenstermacher family, star parties at the University of Illinois Springfield are a family tradition.

Scott and Lori Fenstermacher started bringing their two daughters, Jaina, 9, and Shelby, 6, to the events about three years ago. Now, they usually attend four or five star parties a year.

"We get a lot of enjoyment out of them," Lori said. "We come away learning something new. It started out as a way to foster Jaina's interest in space, but it's become a very enjoyable family activity."

The Fenstermachers were among more than 100 people who were on hand Friday as the university's first star party of 2010 began.

John Martin, assistant professor of astronomy/physics, gave the crowd a quick lesson in astronomy and the universe on the way to the top of Brookens library, where the observatory is located.

The professor talked about stars, galaxies and the moon and took questions from the kids.

One child wanted to know why there were craters on the moon, and Martin explained that they were caused by big chunks of rock that have hit the moon. The craters are still there because in space, there isn't any wind to erase the marks.

On top of the library, the crowd had the opportunity to look through three telescopes, including the big 14-inch reflecting telescope that is housed inside the dome.

The big telescope was trained on Mars Friday night.

"It was half-orange. It was cool," Jaina said.

Little sister Shelby added, "It was like a rainbow."

Martin said looking at Mars with a telescope is different than viewing a far-away star.

"A star is so far away you can't magnify it enough so that it looks like anything other than a little point of light. But Mars is close enough that you can see it has a circular shape. It looks red, and under good conditions, you might be able to see some features."

Later this spring, people might see something slightly different when they look at Mars.

"Over the course of the months, the polar caps will change with the seasons on Mars, like winter and summer here on earth," Martin said.

People also got a chance to see the moon during Friday's star party. At later star parties, Saturn should be in view.

Star parties are planned through April. They won't be held during the summer.

"The sun sets a lot later in the summer," Martin said. "During the middle of summer, we'd have to wait until 9:30 or 10 p.m. for it to get dark. That's a little late for some people, so we decided to do them around the equinox in the spring and fall."

John Reynolds can be reached at 788-1524.

Upcoming Star Parties

The University of Illinois-Springfield will host star parties, weather permitting, April 2, April 16, April 23 and April 30. There will be no party on April 9.

Star parties are held from 8 to 10 p.m. at the UIS observatory on the roof of Brookens Library.

Cloud cover could force organizers to cancel a party. People with questions on whether the weather is suitable for star gazing can call 206-8342 at 7 p.m. on the day of the event.

Star parties are free and open to the public. Reservations are not required.

More information is available at www.uis.edu/astronomy/about/starparties.html.

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