



Lowell Observatory ignites excitement in Flagstaff community

(Photo by David Carballido-Jeans)

BY MEGAN TROUTMAN

Home of the discovery of Pluto and first evidence of the expansion of the universe, the Lowell Observatory is one of Flagstaff's most alluring sites.

Located five minutes away from the NAU campus, this research facility welcomes the public to observe the solar system through night talks, interactive exhibits and special events.

Feb. 2-6 the Observatory held a special week-long event recognizing Jupiter's opposition, the time when Earth passes between Jupiter and the sun.

Phoenix resident Jackson Forsey happened to come across the observatory during Jupiter week.

"We just kind of stumbled upon it," Forsey said. "I had known that there was an observatory somewhere, but I didn't know the public could go to it."

Forsey was excited to learn more about Jupiter and what the observatory had to offer. For Jupiter week, the observatory hosted night talks specifically about the

planet.

"We're just here learning, I love to learn and this is a great place," Forsey said. "It's cool that the community has access to this."

Lowell brings in visitors from all over the globe, averaging about 70,000 visitors a year for the public viewing. Because a lot of foreign visitors come to the observatory, astronomers keep dictionaries in Hindi, Japanese, Arabic, Spanish and several other languages.

"A lot of people from Phoenix obviously come up here on the weekends, but [also] tourists from all over," said astronomer Brian Skiff. "I mean they all go to the Grand Canyon, so they stop here the day before or the day after. So people are from everywhere."

Skiff has worked at the observatory for nearly 40 years and spends most of his time observing stars and asteroids. Other astronomers specialize in star formations, comets, asteroids or galaxies.

"It's hard to be a jack of all trades because there's so much to know," Skiff said.

During Jupiter week, Skiff was excited for the opposition. The skies had been clear for the majority of the week, so Jupiter would be especially bright through the telescopes.

"It really doesn't change much from night to night," Skiff said.

For Jupiter week, public programs supervisor Emily Bevins assisted in giving nightly talks for younger groups as well as more technical talks.

"The most exciting thing is just going over to see it through a telescope," Bevins said. "You always see these images of Jupiter in textbooks and on the Internet floating around, but it's really cool when you can see the actual object with your eyes instead of in a picture."

Despite popular belief, Lowell is not only a museum, but also a modern research center. Most astronomy facilities are located miles away from cities in order to avoid the city lights and pollution, which makes this center unique.

"It's kind of confusing when you're visiting this site because a lot of our telescopes that do research are not here, so

you don't actually see a lot of the research happening because we had to move them away from the city of Flagstaff," Bevins said.

When the observatory was founded in 1894, the light produced from Flagstaff was small enough that astronomers were still able to do research. Now, 121 years later, Flagstaff has grown exponentially so most of the research had to move farther from the city.

"I talked to a lot of people and they're super surprised that we still do research here. We're really close to the city," Bevins said.

Despite the close proximity to city life, Lowell Observatory still thrives on locals and tourists coming to observe research and various exhibits. With a small entrance fee, anyone is welcome to learn more about the solar system.

"You have to pay to see it," Forsey said. "But that's the one thing I'd love to put my money towards — learning more about the universe."