



Astronomy world's stars come down to Yucca Valley

By Rebecca Unger, For the Star | Posted: Tuesday, September 18, 2012 11:53 pm

YUCCA VALLEY — The 16th annual Starry Nights Festival at the community center Saturday, Sept. 15, celebrated astronomers past and present.

Ken Drummond of Sky's The Limit Observatory and Nature Center in Twentynine Palms played a variety of famous scientists on the "stage" of the Yucca Room. With quick costume and accent changes, Drummond made science history come alive through Galileo, 18th century planet finder William Herschel and the 20th century's galaxy discoverer Edwin Hubble and physicist Albert Einstein.



Dr. David Levy greets Ken Drummond, in costume as Edwin Hubble.

Rebecca Unger photo

Matthew Ota of the South Bay Astronomical Society presented a tribute to E.E. Barnard, the 19th century astronomer and photography pioneer. Using archival photos, letters and documents, Ota traced Barnard's life from a childhood of poverty in the South during the Civil War to his directorships of university observatories to his use of photography to bring the wonders of the heaven down to earth.

John Varsik studies our closest star with the world's largest solar telescope at an observatory on Big Bear Lake. He explained sun spots, solar flares, coronal mass ejections and the solar wind. He told how this "space weather" impacts everything we rely on in our modern world, from polar air routes to communication satellites to space-walking astronauts on equipment-repair missions.

"The sun is the Rosetta Stone of astrophysics," Varsik told his audience. "We can study it and compare it with other stars."

Dennis Mammana is a cosmic tour guide (with a master's degree in astronomy) from Anza Borrego who organizes vacations to world-wide eclipse events and aurora borealis viewing sites. Mammana's presentation of the "Seven Wonders of the Cosmos" included our vibrant home planet, distant "island universes" and the births and deaths of stars.

David Levy of Arizona is famous for many comets discoveries, including comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 that tore through Jupiter's cloudy surface in 1994. Levy shared his humorous experiences as a teenage astronomy terror, emphasizing the importance of encouraging youngsters in their pursuits of the sciences.

Levy concluded his presentation with musical selections and a slide show that illustrated his keynote "Silent sky, holy sky" theme.

"The sky rewards patience," he said. "A telescope is not just metal and glass, it has a soul."

Dr. Stephenie Slahor, a lawyer from the low desert who is also meteor enthusiast, told of historic meteor showers and meteorite impacts, of Admiral Perry's expeditions to retrieve multi-ton iron meteorites from Greenland, of how rocks falling from the sky have been revered and feared. Dr. Slahor broke into lilting song with "Stars Fell on Alabama," which she claims commemorates the great Leonid meteor shower of 1833 that many thought heralded the end of the world.

During the twilight reception buffet, Robbie Robb and his band provided the instrumental repast, while the Southern California Desert Video Astronomers and students from Los Angeles City College prepared a field of telescopes for the evening's star party.

"The astronomy we do out here is possible because we can see the stars," Tom O'Key, one of the video astronomers, said. "Our mission, as a member of the International Dark Sky Association, is to promote the preservation of the dark night sky."

At the reception, Yucca Valley Mayor Dawn Rowe noted the annual festival "has proven to be a successful and dynamic event, and this year is living up to that reputation." She thanked the Andromeda Society, the staff of the Hi-Desert Nature Museum and the astronomers for the program, noting that "amateur astronomers have contributed to many important discoveries, and they play an active role in the study of astronomy."