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Photo by Tracy Dreslinski
 Visitors at the Vollbrecht Planetarium in Southfield check out Saturn's rings during a presentation Feb. 11.

When the stars align

By Jennie Miller
 C & G Staff Writer

SOUTHFIELD — Inside the little-known Vollbrecht Planetarium in Southfield, astronomy enthusiasts Mike Best, John Tremonti and Cliff Jones share a little bit of science with anyone who will listen.

They show up to keep the place running, to keep the interest alive and to open the minds of children who come to learn. Astronomy, they say, is a fascinating field, and their passion is hard to miss.

“It shows that the world and the universe is a big place, and it makes you appreciate everything that is going on,” Best said.

“And our place in it,” Tremonti added. “(Given) the vastness of space, and that we have some comprehension of it — that we can understand some small part of it — it just kind of tickles the mind a little bit.”

Perhaps the planetarium is the best-kept secret in Southfield, but its staffers would prefer otherwise.

“It’s a tremendous resource,” Tremonti said. “It’s unfortunate that (people) don’t utilize it more.”

Years ago, funding for the planetarium fell short. The science teacher who ran the facility retired, and its doors were closed. Best has been filling in since 1998, jumping at the chance to share a little piece of the universe through his interactive presentations.

They bring their own laptops, collect donations for new equipment and props, and have even paid for some items out of their own pockets. There is no annual budget for the facility, and while a fee is collected for shows and special presentations, it goes to the Parks and Recreation Department and helps pay for maintenance costs the school district provides.

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“It’s so sad,” Best said of the limited use of the planetarium. “But we do this because we enjoy it. Anyone that has a hobby enjoys talking about it ... And this is a hobby you can take anywhere in the world. You just step outside and look up. ... The number of stars in the universe is (about the same as) the number of grains of sand on the Earth.”

Jones has been interested in astronomy since he was 8 years old and his father took him to a planetarium in Pittsburgh. He joined astronomy clubs, took classes and built his own telescopes. The interest has spanned his entire adult life, as well.

“I like the fact that it’s reaching out beyond our daily experience,” Jones said. “It’s science in its purest sense. It’s science for the sake of science. It’s exploring new things. It’s a very fascinating field.”

The Southfield facility is something that can be of interest to anyone, young or old. There truly is something for everyone, as Alicia Herpick found out on Feb. 11.

Herpick, a teacher at Cloverdale, a Farmington school for severely, multiply and cognitively impaired students, brought a group of kids to the planetarium for a presentation.

“It’s getting out into the community. It’s the visual stimulation. It’s just sitting and listening,” Herpick explained of the ways her students benefit from the experience. “(Best) is very knowledgeable and great with them. He has a soothing voice. And they love the light stimulation.”

While Herpick took some students to the planetarium at the Cranbrook Institute of Science the week prior, she said she loved the intimacy of Vollbrecht in Southfield.

“It’s nice and small,” she said. “And it’s local, which is very nice. We like to support our local communities.”

The friendly setting is something Vollbrecht’s planetarians like best about the facility.

“There’s interface between the presenter and the (audience) — it’s set up as a classroom and we encourage question-and-answer,” Tremonti said, adding that it’s what sets them apart from a place like the Detroit Science Center, where they might put on a fantastic show, but it is more expensive and less interactive.

It may not be a state-of-the-art facility like others in the area, but it’s got plenty of character, down to the star projector they’ve been using since 1967, at the height of the space race.

Public shows at Vollbrecht are put on at 7 p.m. on Friday nights, at a cost of \$7 per person for a 90-minute presentation. On Feb. 19, Vollbrecht will feature a relaxing tour under the night sky, and on Feb. 26, visitors will get the chance to learn everything there is to know about telescopes. On March 5, Jones will discuss “Our Place in the Universe.”

Private class sessions are offered on select weekdays at 9:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m. and 12:45 p.m. by appointment, at a cost of \$90 for groups of up to 30. There is an additional cost for larger groups.

The class presentations are similar to the one the students at Cloverdale received. They learned about each of the planets and saw pictures of the craters of the moon, asteroids in space and Saturn’s rings. They saw pictures of Earth taken from equipment on Mars and an image of a rover arriving on Mars by parachute, and they made shapes out of the designs on the moon. They learned about the oceans and volcanoes on Jupiter’s moons and the dust storms on Mars. They even saw images from all over the world that some people believe are UFOs.

“I was amazed,” Herpick said. “It was very interesting.”

The Vollbrecht Planetarium is located at 19100 Filmore in Southfield, at the far end of Adler Elementary School.

For more information about Vollbrecht Planetarium, its Friday night public show schedule, or to set up a student show, call Jones at (313) 770-7468 or Best at (734) 968-3496, or e-mail starmikebest@comcast.net

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