

SPACE

diversions



Melissa McReynolds/ Daily Nebraskan

Volunteer Cheryl Hoffman gazes at the September constellations Saturday in front of the Hyde Memorial Observatory.

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Staff Reporter

One by one, the observers peered into the telescope's eyepiece. Each time, the bright point of light in the evening sky blossomed into a full white sphere encircled by rings and suddenly became Saturn, rather than just a distant star.

Moving on to the next telescope, observers watched the twin stars of the Alberio Double Star System twinkle in many colors and the third telescope offered a view of the Ring Nebula in Lyra.

"A lot of the people here tonight came to see the Neptune slides from Voyager 2," said Cheryl Hoffman, one of the evening's volunteers at the Hyde Memorial Observatory in Holmes Park.

Even though the admission is free, Hoffman said, not many residents knew about the observatory's existence before Halley's comet. Events like Halley's comet and Voyager 2 have drawn special attention to the observatory.

Jack A. Dunn, board member for the Hyde Memorial Observatory and the evening's supervisor, said Halley's comet drew a crowd of 2,000 observers and the recent moon eclipse attracted 700 people.

The observatory, which opened 11 years ago, was designed for public use, Dunn said.

Most observatories in the United States are associated with research centers, private industry or academic programs, Dunn said. Lincoln's facility is one of only a few community observatories in the Midwest.

Dunn said the observatory's construction was funded completely by donations. After completion, the observatory was donated to the City of Lincoln and now is operated by the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

The department staffs the observatory completely with volunteers, Dunn said.

"The people who work here like to tell the story of what's out there," Dunn said, pointing up toward the starred sky.

Mark Fairchild, a programmer for Lincoln Telephone Co. and member of the Prairie Astronomy Club, said he goes to the observatory to help answer questions almost every Saturday night.

Fairchild said that if he can't answer a question, when he re-

turns home, he checks the information for the next time.

"That way, they (the observers) are learning and I'm learning too," Fairchild said.

Hoffman said in addition to her regularly scheduled days, she tries to stop in a couple of times a month to see if the staff on duty needs extra help.

Hoffman said even though she doesn't have an extensive astronomy background, she tries to at least answer the "yes" or "no" questions.

Dunn agreed that on the average, the general public doesn't have an extensive astronomy background but "you don't have to be an Einstein to go out and enjoy the skies."

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