

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Physician Looks to the Stars

During summers as grade school students in Woodland Hills, Calif., Dr. Steven Reeder and his brothers would set up cots in their backyard and sleep beneath the stars, gazing at the cosmos.

"We'd fall asleep gazing upward, using binoculars and just the naked eye," recalls Dr. Reeder, who currently practices family medicine in Mesa, Ariz.

Despite his longtime fascination with the night sky—including long-standing subscriptions to the magazines "Sky and Telescope" and "Astronomy"—he didn't seriously start the hobby until 1991, when he volunteered to teach content required for an astronomy merit badge to a local Boy Scout troop.

"One year, we took the scouts to Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff [Ariz.], the site where Pluto was discovered," he said. "We had a great time with that old telescope."

Before long, he bought his first gadget for stargazing: a 4-inch reflector telescope.

"You couldn't see much with it, but I could see the rings around Saturn," said Dr. Reeder, who is a former Boy Scout but

never earned the astronomy merit badge.

In 1999, he acquired an 8-inch telescope, which is now the smallest in his collection. "It was computer driven, so it was much easier to find things and look at stars that had exploded, as well as distant and close galaxies, and nebula," he said.

Determined to "see" even better, Dr. Reeder designed and built an observatory in his backyard in the summer of 2007.

The observatory "resembles a playhouse—a requirement of my psychologist wife—but it functions quite nicely to keep the weather out and the equipment safe," he said.

The equipment includes a computer-



As a dedicated astronomy buff, Dr. Steven Reeder spends about 1 night a week in his backyard observatory.

driven 14-inch Celestron telescope on a German equatorial mount.

The device "is like a built-in planetarium, so if you fix on a couple of stars, the computer then sets up like an observatory. You can tell it to focus on Orion or wherever, and it will go right there," he said.

One night, he hosted a group of 50 Boy Scouts, which was "a little hectic,"



Dr. Reeder photographed the Sombrero galaxy using his telescopic equipment.

he said. "They were more interested in the telescope's laser pointer than in the celestial sights."

These days, he spends about 1 night a week in the observatory gazing at the sky, drawn by what he described as "the grandeur of it all."

Stargazing "provides a feeling of how much God has created out there," he said. "It's a sense of the divine, something much greater than us. It is a remarkable thing."

Dr. Reeder went on to note that when a person travels to remote areas and view the stars clearly, "your thoughts generally turn to things of divine character, and you wonder if there are other civilizations. Then you go into the city and man-made light blocks all that out. It's almost like a metaphor for our time. Our technology takes away some of the good and divine thought that we all have when we're out in Mother Nature."

One event he observed from his backyard perch was the explosion of the comet Tuttle in October 2007. The comet "was in the northern part of the sky and it suddenly fell apart and gave a gorgeous view in the telescope, this nice little ball of snow and ice and rock," Dr. Reeder said.

One highlight Dr. Reeder saw came in 2001, before he built his observatory, when Mars and the Earth reached the closest points in their respective orbits. "That was a wonderful sight," he said.

Dr. Reeder's youngest son, who is now 21 years old, shares his interest in all things astronomy, but his wife sometimes calls herself an "astronomy widow," he said. "She's good-natured about it. She says that unless she sees somebody waving back at her, she's not really interested." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

A Breathtaking Night Under the Stars Is Remembered

The first time I went to summer camp as a child, I earned a badge for the constellations. And to this day, I could probably still distinguish Auriga from Lepus, if only I could see them.

You see, from a stargazing perspective, I am unfortunate enough to live near Los Angeles, where the night sky is orange thanks to the smog. And if by chance I see anything that resembles a star, it's probably an airplane.

Truth be told, this isn't really a problem anymore, since my stargazing is sadly limited to a forlorn glance at the sky while unloading groceries from my car. But there was a time when I saw the night sky in its formidable splendor. That was back in the early 1990s when I attended medical school at Loma Linda (Calif.) University.

My third year of medical school was an exhausting time. My classmates and I were wearied by clinical rotations and hospital calls. The pressure of boards was mounting, and the match weighed heavily on our minds.

And then we heard the news. An asteroid shower was scheduled to pass over our area. Knowing we couldn't miss this, a couple of classmates and I headed to the local mountains. We had no idea where we would stop to watch the sky, but we hoped our view would be clearer up there. And it was.

It was breathtaking. The sheer number of stars was overwhelming. I thought I knew the constellations until that night.

Stretching out on the grass, I was reminded of grade school history lessons. Images of ancient mariners, explorers, and slaves seeking freedom filled my mind. The stars over my head were the same stars that guided these nighttime travelers as they navigated uncertainty, faced peril, risked their lives for freedom, and lived to tell.

And then, without warning, the asteroid shower passed overhead. Looking at the milky streaks in the sky, my worries seemed light-years away.

We were shivering from a mix of cold and amazement as we got back in the car, only to discover the car would not start. We were a group of women stranded on a sparsely traveled mountain road, in the dead of night, with temperatures dropping. And this was before the advent of cell phones.

We stood by the road, wondering what we would do if a car didn't pass by. And conversely, what to do if one did. We were discussing the wisdom of us, as women, catching a ride with a stranger in the middle of the night, when suddenly a car approached. We began waving our arms wildly.



BY RICHELLE MARRACINO, M.D.

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The purpose of The Rest of Your Life is to celebrate the interests and passions of physicians outside of medicine. If you have an idea for this column or would like to tell your story, send an e-mail to d.brunk@elsevier.com.

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