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Solar Astronomy Project Visits Tucker Middle School

Founder Stephen Ramsden brings the sun to Tim Ryan's sixth grade science class.

By [Ginny Mauldin-Kinney](#) | [Email the author](#) | 5:45 am

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Stephen Ramsden with his solar telescopes at Tucker Middle School Credit [Ginny Mauldin-Kinney](#)

Sporting colorful tattoos, a stocky build, and driving a tricked-out van, [Stephen Ramsden](#) does not resemble your typical science enthusiast. Ramsden is the director and founder of [The Charlie Bates Solar Astronomy Project](#) that began after Bates' death in 2007. "I decided to shift my focus on giving to others rather than giving to myself," he said. "My hobby was already astronomy and I like solar astronomy best so I started this non-profit to honor my friend. Word of mouth has spread it to where it is now."

When Ramsden visited Tim Ryan's sixth grade science class at [Tucker Middle School](#) last week, he held a student audience captive with an array of telescopes and computer monitors that also drew the attention of passersby. He feels that his eclectic appearance makes him more approachable to today's student population. "It adds a cool aspect to what I do and the kids think that there may be something in it for them," he said.

Being selected as a [NASA Solar System Ambassador](#) in 2008 played a pivotal role in the founding of the Charlies Bates Solar Astronomy Program which entertains 70,000 plus students and adults annually. "It gave me insight into how other Solar System Ambassadors were conducting science and education outreach so that I could develop my own thing," he said. "So I purchased the vehicles, the mounts, more telescopes, and cameras over the last four years."

In addition to using his own capital to fund the non-profit project, many organizations provide donations through sponsorships. According to Ramsden, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association supports the project by purchasing the [solar] glasses along with funding from the National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees. "The glasses are the single biggest expense of the charity," he said. "Each participant gets a free pair."

Ramsden believes that looking at our very own star impacts kids and their basic understanding of science on a very fundamental level. "I think it takes science out of the classroom to memorize this and that and turns it into a practical application," he said.

In addition to educating students twice a week about our sun, Ramsden likes to photograph it as well. His images were recently published on the [National Geographic](#) and [Space Weather](#) websites. "I decided I would incorporate [solar photography] in between classes and let the kids take the images. Watching a kid do it makes it even better," he said.

In addition to the school events, Ramsden participates in events like Dragon*Con and the Northeast Astronomy Forum. Actors Leonard Nimoy, William Shatner, Christopher Lloyd as well as Harry Potter's Weasley Brothers are among many VIPs who have stared through Ramsden's telescopes at the annual Science Fiction convention. "Dragon*Con is a great event that I was invited to in 2009. I can't believe I missed it all these years," he said.

When asked what he feels the general public gets out of this project, Ramsden replied, "the average public has never seen anything like it before. They've been taught not to look at the sun." He continued, "the whole point is to get the interest sparked in the fact that the sun is a star and you can look at it [safely] through these telescopes." Ramsden said that the end goal is "to spark the general public with some kind of feeling of wonder and make them look up more."

The Bates Project has Ramsden booked for the next five months. He is on the lookout for qualified volunteers who want to educate the public about the sun through [The Charlie Bates Astronomy Project Outreach Club](#). "I will provide equipment and supplies to those who are interested. Let's get it going," he said.

[Check out this time lapse video](#) of students rolling through the telescopes at Tucker Middle along with a photo gallery.

Patch contributor Ginny Mauldin-Kinney is also a NASA-JPL Solar System Ambassador and her son Phillip attends Tucker Middle School.

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