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Street Level: A Personal Look at the Neighborhood

By Eileen Drennen | [Email the author](#) | April 11, 2011

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Bringing the Sun Down to Earth

Stephen W. Ramsden wants you to look up! But not without the proper optical equipment

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On Sunday, the sun was climbing as high as it could into the skies over the Little Five Points Community Center.

We were hiding from it, taking refuge in whatever shade presented itself, as we walked along the tree-lined sidewalks of Edgewood Avenue.

I was a little worried about embarking upon a Serious Walk so late – it was already after 10 a.m. – and wasn't looking forward to the brightest rays of the day.

Until, that is, I met Stephen W. Ramsden, who helped us see the giant orange ball of flame overhead in a whole new way.

We chanced upon him – with his cool beard and sideburns; baggy shorts and a great crop of tattoos, he could have passed for a roadie for some band performing nearby – pulling giant telescopes out of a brightly painted black van.

But it quickly became clear that the former Navy electronics technician and full-time air-traffic controller, who was arranging sophisticated optical instruments in the parking lot out front, was the main event.

The van, which he calls “the coolest nerd-mobile on the planet,” was covered in words and pictures: The acronym “S.U.N.S.P.O.T.” blazed across the front, in sun-yellow letters edged in red; the web address – www.solarastronomy.org – in bright lemon across the roof; “Charlie Bates Solar Astronomy Project” in bright tomato along the side door; a blistering close-up of the flaming orange fireball itself. Rainbow wheel rims covered all four tires.

Those initials stand for “SUN Specific Public Outreach Truck,” the rolling educational vehicle Ramsden created in 2007 to share his passion for the thrills of sun-watching.

Or, as he describes it in a brochure, “the awesome beauty and dynamic features of our nearest star.”

Ramsden, who lives with his wife Natalie and two dogs in Virginia-Highland, was looking for a way to give back; to do more than just work and pay bills.

Since he created his innovative outreach and education program, which is named in honor of a late friend and longtime co-worker, he's spoken to about 50,000 people a year at about 70 events all over the world (including hometown fave Dragon Con, where Ramsden donned a bright-yellow sun suit and set up his observatory-quality telescopes on the pool deck of the Hilton).

He's especially dedicated to students, he says, who are still young enough to get excited about the science of the skies, and may also need an interest in something that's much larger than themselves. Along the way, Ramsden has also taken some amazing pictures of the Sun, which you can see on his website.

After setting up his supplies on a couple of folding tables, he hands us each a pair of free solar glasses – or eclipse-viewing glasses – so we can see the mighty orb directly before checking it out through one of the high-powered telescopes.

Each viewfinder offers a slightly different perspective, so we sample one eyepiece after the other and consider how funny it is that we started this day plotting ways to avoid the Sun's rays, and now we're staring at black lines and waves on its very surface.

At the moment, Ramsden said, the Sun is entering a period of elevated activity – called “solar maximum” or solar max – which is expected to peak in the next several years.

A quick search online will give you a sense of how scientists and governments are trying to sort out what it might mean. There's plenty of hype out there, Ramsden says, which makes a proper solar education more important than ever.

So what's the main thing he wants students to understand?

“How fragile the Sun - Earth relationship is,” he said. “And how the subtlest changes in one can cause changes in the other.”

He also makes sure they understand how solar radiation affects aviation, communication and the Earth's climate.

“I tell them what they are looking at and how it works,” he said, “so they can reason with themselves about what's possible.”

What makes this cycle of solar activity so newsworthy is how much more reliant upon technology the world has become since the last time it happened.

“All the modern technology we have is satellite-based,” Ramsden says. “It was developed in a 30-year low of solar activity. And no one has really thought about what could happen.”

One thing's certain though, he adds. “We will have some lifestyle changes in the next few years,” as the implications become clearer. It wouldn't hurt to have a backup plan for losing electricity, he said, or access to the Internet.

Over the four hours the astronomer was in Inman Park, about 150 people stopped by to look through the scopes and learn about the brightest spot we know.

One question Ramsden hears often, he said, is, “how much water would it take to put out the Sun?”

A quadrillion gallons?

Not even.

“It's not fire,” says the advocate for solar physics patiently, adding he wants to get the general public both more interested in, and more knowledgeable, about the Sun. “Nuclear fusion is not quenched by water.”

Clearly, he's got his work cut out for him.

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