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Outreach Spotlight

INDIVIDUAL SOLAR OUTREACH IN ATLANTA (MAY 2009)

My name is Stephen Ramsden, a 20-year veteran Air Traffic Controller in Atlanta, GA. In 2007 I started a small Solar Outreach Program in my local community called the Charlie Bates Solar Astronomy Project (www.charliebates.org). This year the program has grown to reaching over 3,000 teens and adults in the Atlanta area.



Luckily my job with the federal government allows me to take advantage of the Aviation and Space Education Outreach program in order to have my work schedule changed around so that I may visit as many groups as I can each month. The National Air Traffic Controllers Association generously provides a never ending supply of eclipse viewing glasses that I give away to every person in line so that they can look up and see the Sun in all of its majestic glory while waiting in line for a view through various solar telescopes. These have become the favorite souvenir of my program. I am also a NASA/JPL Solar System Ambassador and have been able to use their resources to enhance my project. I've recently received some solar educational materials from SOHO as well.

My visits to schools usually begin with a 10-minute lecture on the formation of our star and the resulting planets. Then I explain how Hydrogen atoms fuse to become Helium and release a certain wavelength of light that we can see through my White Light, Calcium K line and H-alpha Solar Scopes. These kids usually have never seen a narrowband solar telescope and I hear a lot of "wows" each time I bring them out. When the Sun cooperates with a 60,000+ mile filament or prominence or a large active region with sunspots there is no replacing the look on a kid's face after you explain the enormity of the features. I like to also explain how the heat that they feel on the side of their face is a product of the features that they are looking at. This kind of ties it all together as the big fireball of hot plasma that the Sun really is.



I also make it a point to hold events at various public venues like the local coffee shop or Boy Scout/Girl Scout campouts. I have been to several church youth groups and also am the onsite Solar Astronomer for the Charlie Elliott Wildlife Management Area in Mansfield, GA when they have youth groups doing campouts or nature walks. Most store owners or youth organizers are absolutely ecstatic when I ask them if they would like a demonstration of solar viewing. It is very easy to find places to do outreach. I occasionally even set up a telescope or two at a local park or just on the sidewalk around town. People seem to flock to the telescopes out of curiosity. Sometimes my friends in the Charlie Elliott Chapter of the Atlanta Astronomy Club will come to help out, but I have found it pretty easy and VERY worthwhile to just get out there and do it as a one man operation. I would like to coordinate my efforts with others if possible.



The kids are fascinated by the details of how it takes the light a little over 8 minutes to reach us from the Sun and they always want to know what would happen if it "blew up". One little girl asked me once "How much water would it take to put out the Sun". I couldn't answer that one.

The NASA SOHO site and the Stereo A and B programs are a great source of excellent information for me to use in my outreach. It is so awesome to be able to pull up a current H-alpha or White Light image of the Sun on my iPhone on site! I also use the SOHO site extensively in the classroom to show some of the wonderful movies of solar activity or the animations explaining the nature of the Sun. It has been invaluable in my work with kids. Thanks again NASA/ESA!

I would strongly suggest that if you are fortunate enough to own astronomical viewing equipment of any kind that you make it a point to take it out and share it with people who have never been exposed to telescopes before. It is very rewarding. Who knows where the next Einstein or Newton is just waiting for someone to spark his or her imagination?



Remember, look up more!

TELL US ABOUT YOUR ACTIVITIES: If you use our SOHO images or movies, provide outreach and programs in the area of solar study, and would like to be considered for our Outreach Spotlight section, write to steele.hill@gsfc.nasa.gov with a brief overview of your efforts. If we think you'd make a good candidate, we will contact you.

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