

# Technology brings stars in focus

BY JENNIFER PLACINTO  
STAFF WRITER

At nearly 70 years of age, the McMath-Hulbert Solar Observatory in central Oakland County is not out-of-date by any means. What began as the first observatory in the world to make motion pictures of the sun and

other planets is busy preparing for spring and summer celestial happenings.

The Lake Angelus observatory is undergoing \$50,000 worth of restorations and renovations to be completed this fall, including resurfacing of the mirrors and rehabilitation of the working elements in the towers. It's receiving \$760,000 worth of technolo-

gies on loan for research and development.

"It's one of the best kept secrets in the state if not in the country," said Jim Ross, director of the observatory. "Where else can they (students) go and get their hands on instruments and technologies of this nature."

A few added attractions this spring include: virtual reality, access to the World Wide Web with the ability to develop your own home page, Internet, a new laboratory, and a multi-media lab to learn about computer-generated imagery.

With the new technologies, however, many students won't have to leave their class to use the observatory. Instead, they can dial up the observatory and point the telescope in the direction they desire, download an electronic picture of the sun, and do a statistical analysis without ever leaving their classrooms. Another example of this is "Collaboratory," organized between the Detroit Zoo and the observatory. Collaboratory will allow students to take electronic field trips, among other things, via high speed fiber optics.

Ross said the students will ultimately decide how virtual reality technology is used, but one project they plan is building a real-time, holographic, three-dimensional image of the sun. "What's wonderful about young kids is they have the 'what if' mentality," said Ross, a resident of Lake Angelus. "Who better to identify what would be interesting than the people you appeal to?"

Students in the youth science program are already putting

these technologies to work. Through the observatory, they recently organized a two-way interactive teleconference with the Michigan Science Teachers Association conference at the Westin Hotel in Detroit.

With the unmanned space craft, Pathfinder, en route to Mars, the students showed state science instructors how they simulated the surface of Mars and created Lego Dacta, computer driven Lego vehicles designed to run on the sandy terrain. With an expected landing date of July 4, the students plan to simulate the land vehicle's motion via the Internet.

The observatory is funded by donations and admittance fees and cared for by some 60 volunteers. The three telescope tower observatory uses science, math, art and technology through field trips and summer camps held on site to "capture (students) imaginations," Ross said.

"This gives every person an opportunity to work hands on," Ross said.

Ross is a mentor to ninth graders Jason Evans and Brad Reynolds of the International Academy in Bloomfield Township. They are organizing events through the observatory for a product team class.



STAFF PHOTO BY STEVE CAMPBELL

**Planetary Possibilities:** McMath-Hulbert Observatory director Jim Ross, Marcey Walsh of Clarkston (middle), special projects director, and Paul Corsa of Waterford, photo director, develop the Comet Hale-Bopp page on the Internet.

The class teaches the 15-year-olds how to work with businesses. The students organized a lunar eclipse event in September and are organizing a Comet Hale-Bopp event from 7-10 p.m. Thursday, March 27, and an event for the July 4 Mars landing.

"It's really fun and a good learning experience," said Reynolds, a Royal Oak resident.

"The mentors are just there to help us, but we plan everything," Evans said. "This is to prepare us for the business world and the future."

"It's really interesting because we had a project that we were going to do, but didn't have enough time," added Evans, a Huntington Woods resident. "We found out what it would be like in the real world."

## Observatory Programs

The McMath-Hulbert Solar Observatory offers various programs and opportunities to use the three tower telescopes throughout the year. Some of the regular programs offered include:

- ★ **Discovery program** - a summer camp program that runs in weekly intervals and features computers, art, pottery, astronomy, nature trail hikes, archeological digging, research gardening, involving soil studies and hybrid vegetables, and more. The camp, which cost \$120 per individual, runs from 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., June 16 through Aug. 31 and is already filling up. Groups and individuals are welcome and early and late arrivals do not cost extra.

- ★ **A youth science training program** for students ages 7 to 18 free of charge. This program is offered during the school year as an extension of the summer program.

- ★ **Tours** are available from 12 to 4 p.m. Sundays. Persons wishing to attend are asked to call in advance. The admission fee is \$5 per person.

Some upcoming events include:

- ★ The opportunity to view a lunar eclipse during the evening March 23. The admission fee is \$5 per person.

- ★ The Comet Hale Bopp is scheduled for March 27. Advanced reservations are needed to attend this evening event which will feature the viewing of the comet, general information about comets, and display of a lunar rock, which will be delivered by NASA for the event.

There is a \$25 annual fee to become a member of the McMath-Hulbert Astronomical Society. Members can visit the observatory free of charge and serve as volunteers and attend meeting of the observatory.

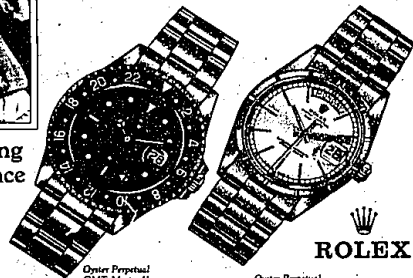
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