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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

Boonton's hidden gem: The Sheephill Observatory

By MEGAN ROCHE Contributing Writer Sep 7, 2017



The Sheep Hill Astronomical Association is raising funds to repair the dome at Boonton's Sheep Hill Observatory.

Nestled in Sheep Hill Park on Ross Drive in Boonton lies the Sheep Hill Observatory. The observatory was built and opened in 1973 by two mason workers, Edmund De Dominicas and Leonard Creatura. According to Donna Marshall, a Sheep Hill Astronomical Association member, this little hidden gem in Boonton is one of the best around for all ages.

"In a time with so much technology there is a greater need to be still and quiet and be more aware of our surroundings. This is a local treasure that many people in the area don't know exists," Marshall said.

The 18-inch Newtonian Reflecting Telescope is located on the second floor of the observatory and is one of the largest telescopes open to the public within the entire state. It was built specifically for the Sheep Hill observatory.

"It's a custom built telescope. There is nothing else like it anywhere in the world," Jen Graeff, a member of the association said.

While the observatory was open and operational during the Aug. 21 solar eclipse, many members of the Sheep Hill Astronomical Association were down in Tennessee to watch the eclipse in totality.

"I totally understand now why people travel to see these. Being down in Tennessee was incredible. I'm already looking into following other eclipses within the next few years," Graeff said.

The group that traveled to see the eclipse in totality spent a few days in Tennessee before heading to watch the moon and sun align. According to 17 year veteran member of the association, Warren Westura, there is nothing quite like the total darkness.

"I have never seen anything like that. For those two and a half minutes of darkness, it was amazing. The wildlife is affected, everything gets dark and it's just awe-inspiring to see in person," Westura said.

The Sheep Hill Astronomical Association is raising money to renovate the entire structure. Fundraising efforts have been ongoing, with the newest event taking place on Saturday, Sept. 9, with a rain date of Sept. 16.

All proceeds raised will benefit the ongoing fundraising for the dome restoration projects, with the final cost of renovations being around \$25,000.

"We are hoping many people will come up to the observatory and see for themselves the immediate need of repairing the dome to protect our telescope. It would be such a shame to lose such an amazing treasure we have here in Boonton due to lack of interest and funding."

Marshall said.

The association has raised \$14,747.00 toward phase one of the renovations, which includes the 16-foot diameter steel dome. The dome is in desperate need of repair as the dome has rusted through thanks to the rainy and snowy climates of Northern New Jersey.

"There is a ton of history located on the lower level of the observatory, so if this gets damaged, we'd lose the history aspect," Graeff said.

Among other renovations, the association would also like to begin the phase two process of their plans by fixing the dome shutters, making sure that the inside of the dome is water tight, and eventually be able to place signage on the outside of the building and add an information kiosk.

The association is hopeful that by using social media, crowdfunding sites, and word of mouth to spread the word, that these repairs can be completed as soon as the money is available.

While many adults have interest in the sky, the observatory also works closely with local Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops to help the young Scouts earn astronomical badges.

"Kids as well as adults need to be looking up at the sky, not staring down at their phones," Marshall said.

With the school systems driving STEM programs now more than ever before, kids of all ages are being treated to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in and outside the classroom. For Graeff, the ideas behind educating kids of all ages is so important.

"We just want to help expose the kids to more and more science. The observatory is right here in our backyard. Why not?" Graeff said.

The association is also in search of new members. Any prospective member has to pay dues, which are \$40 for adults, \$32.50 for seniors, and \$21.25 for students. Members become trained on the telescope at the observatory, which is included in their annual dues.

"We are hoping that more members will join Sheep Hill Astronomy Association because each person that joins comes with their own gifts, abilities and knowledge," Marshall said.

Normal operating hours for the observatory are the third Friday of every month, at 7:30 p.m. During Daylight Savings Time, the observatory opens at 8:30 p.m. weather permitting.

Anyone from the public can attend and you do not have to be a member to have access.

For more information on how to become involved or to check the schedule for upcoming public open house dates, call (973) 335-5990.

