

Fort Bend
Astronomy Club
puts the stars
within reach for
students and
community

*Written by Crystal Rawls
Photography by Suzi Issa*



Fort Bend Astronomy Club volunteers Paul Noll, Patty Tristan, Jim Hutchinson, Jim Jackson, and Tony Wiese enjoy sharing their love of stars with others through the Astronomy on Wheels program

On a cloudless night, away from the bright city, a group of junior high students gathered around five telescopes at an Astronomy on Wheels (AOW) star party hosted by the Fort Bend Astronomy Club (FBAC). One young stargazer seemed especially enthusiastic, asking pointed questions. He peered through each telescope several times, mesmerized by the glittering shapes floating in the night sky. The AOW coordinators were impressed with the boy's newfound passion for astronomy.

Jim Jackson, an AOW coordinator, recalls, "Later, the teacher came up to us and said, 'I don't know what kind of magic you guys have, but this kid has not said more than 10 words all (school) year. He is very smart and is believed to possibly be borderline autistic, but you guys have had him talking, asking questions, and generally being personable and happy all evening. Whatever you guys have, I need some of it.'" Jackson adds, "I left that event wondering what kind of impact we might have on the kids we come into contact with. Likely, it is more than we can imagine. We receive much more than we give when we keep our minds open."

An Astronomical Asset

Founded in the mid-1980s, the FBAC developed the AOW education program in order to bring astronomy to the masses. Club members travel to church groups, scout meetings, schools, and other organizations and explain the science of astronomy and the mechanics of telescopes.

When the previous AOW coordinator Leonard Patillo became ill last year, Jackson and fellow FBAC member Paul Noll stepped in to help. "(We) decided we would rather try to fill the void left by Leonard than have the AOW outreach program fall by the wayside," says Jackson. "We felt that it is clearly a benefit for the kids. If you hear an 8-year-old say, 'Oh wow, that is awesome,' you would understand our feeling." He adds, "I can only say that it was definitely worth our effort."

Between September 2010 and April 2011, AOW hosted events at 18 schools, reaching up to 10,000 Fort Bend students and their parents. If a school wants to hold a science night event for its students, it may send a request to the AOW to schedule a star party. Requests are usually submitted months in advance of the school event, but are worth the extra planning involved. "Club members bring their personal telescopes to the school or to a designated site and assist the students in looking at night sky objects," Jackson explains.

"And of course, we answer many, many questions and come to the realization that many of the kids know quite a lot more about astronomy than (we) did at the same age."

A Universal Love of Stargazing

FBAC is made up of over 125 amateur astronomers ranging in interests from deep sky observing to film astrophotography. While the club serves as common ground for astronomy lovers, its goal is to share knowledge with each member and the public. "Members get the companionship that comes from sharing a fascinating hobby, learning opportunities, and a chance to serve the community," says FBAC President Steve Clayworth. "Club

benefits include discounted subscriptions to astronomical magazines, loaner telescopes, a club library, club outings to the George Observatory, and observing lists. FBAC membership also includes membership in the Astronomical League, a nationwide organization of astronomers."

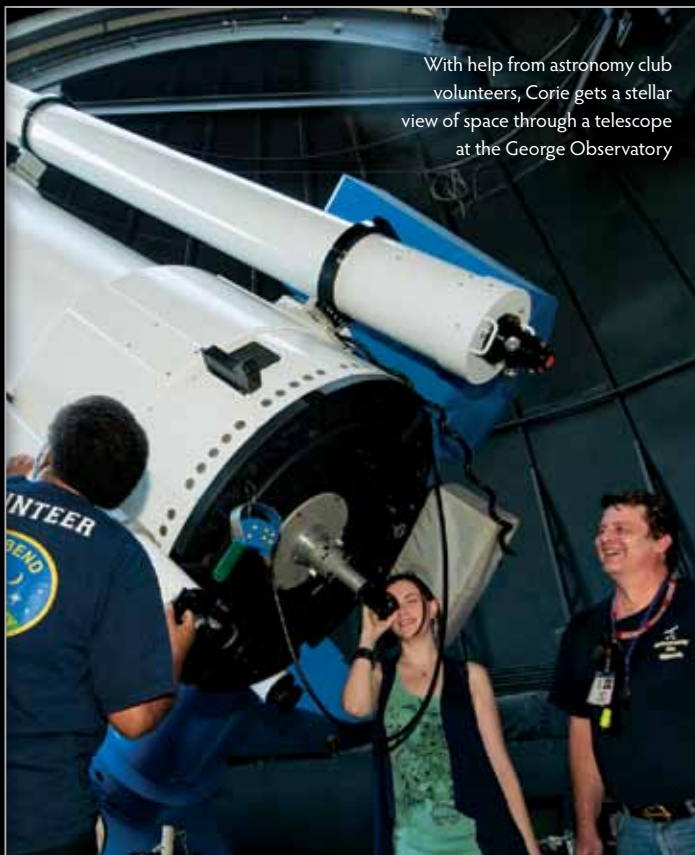
The night sky has fascinated mankind for generations, serving as inspiration for art, literature, and science. Despite thousands of years' worth of study, observers have only scratched the surface in understanding the mysterious universe. "I suppose my favorite thing about astronomy is that it is an infinite science," says Jackson. "No matter how much we learn, there becomes so much more to learn."

Clayworth's fascination with studying the skies began as a young boy in the 1960s at the dawn of the space age. "I vividly remember seeing the Echo 1 satellite – a huge

inflated aluminum sphere used as a passive communication satellite – moving high overhead in 1960. That year I got my first telescope for Christmas."

The Stellar A Team

Through the FBAC's "A team," or asteroid team, the group has made nearly 500 asteroid discoveries. "On my first night of asteroid work, we identified an asteroid that had not been previously known," says Jackson. The A team sent its research data to the U.S. government's asteroid records division, which combined the data with other information it had already received. "This new asteroid was not in their database, so it became a new candidate for asteroid discovery and was assigned a designation number," says Jackson, adding, "It is pleasing to know that we identified an asteroid that was previously unknown even to professional astronomers and that it will be out there long after I will be gone."



With help from astronomy club volunteers, Corie gets a stellar view of space through a telescope at the George Observatory

The Bergstrom family enjoys an evening of stargazing and learning through the Astronomy on Wheels program



Get Involved

FBAC membership is open to anyone interested in astronomy. Member dues are \$30 per year and \$5 for each additional family member. Student membership dues are \$15 per year.

FBAC involves the community through volunteering at the George Observatory in Brazos Bend State Park and through the

Astronomy on Wheels program. Visit fbac.org or email fbacastro@gmail.com. **SLM**

CRYSTAL RAWLS enjoys being a freelance writer and bought her first telescope at the age of 10.

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- Jim Jackson, an AOW coordinator

Astronomy on Wheels volunteers Tony, Jim, Patty, Jim, and Paul travel to local schools, churches, and community functions to share their knowledge of stars and space



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