

A SIDEWALK ASTRONOMER

A FILM ABOUT ASTRONOMY, COSMOLOGY & JOHN DOBSON

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Astronomer on Sidewalk Shares Passion for Galaxy



Keith Bedford for The New York Times

Jeffrey Fox Jacobs, right, helping passers-by find heavenly bodies using his sidewalk telescope.

By COLIN MOYNIHAN

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Maura Iano was strolling through the steamy streets of the West Village on Thursday night with her grandsons, Paul and Allen, when she stopped to gaze at a man on the sidewalk carefully aiming a four-foot-long white cylinder at the horizon.

"What are you doing with that?" demanded Ms. Iano, 71, who lives in Philadelphia and was visiting New York. "It looks like a big gun."

In fact, it was not a weapon, but a telescope.

"We're looking at Jupiter," said Jeffrey Fox Jacobs, the man adjusting the lens. "Would you like to see?"

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Ms. Iano and her grandsons eagerly accepted the offer. As they took turns bending down to peer through the telescope's eyepiece, Mr. Jacobs, 59, embarked on a discursive lecture at the corner of Bleecker Street and Avenue of the Americas.

He explained that the dark parallel lines on the surface of the luminous disc they were seeing were equatorial bands. He added that the starlike objects to the side of the planet were moons first observed in 1610 by Galileo. He mentioned that Jupiter is 380 million to 400 million miles from the Earth and threw in the fact that its diameter is about 88,000 miles.

"Oh, my goodness," Ms. Iano said. "You can really see it. I'm just delighted."

For the past 10 years, Mr. Jacobs, a film buyer who manages the Paris Theater in Midtown and lives in Rye, N.Y., has taken to the streets with his eight-inch, 120-power telescope, constructed of lightweight material, and invited passers-by to look through its lens.

He was inspired by the sidewalk astronomy movement started in the late 1960's in San Francisco by John Dobson, an amateur astronomer who advocated the use of rudimentary homemade telescopes and urged people to take to the streets and share celestial sights with others.

Mr. Dobson invented a simple mount that allows a telescope to swivel like a cannon, which makes it possible for telescopes with large lenses to be constructed cheaply. These days, telescope manufacturers make simple reflector telescopes like the one Mr. Jacobs uses, which are named after Mr. Dobson and sell for as little as a few hundred dollars.

Mr. Jacobs, who has a graduate degree in filmmaking from the University of California, Los Angeles, contacted Mr. Dobson in the spring of 2003, then spent parts of the next two and a half years following him around the country with a digital camera.

He ended up with 45 hours of footage, which was edited, along with 10 hours of space film provided by organizations like NASA and the Hubble's Space Telescope Institute, into a 78-minute documentary called "A Sidewalk Astronomer." It was recently shown at the TriBeCa Film Festival and at the Pioneer Theater in the East Village and is to open soon at theaters in California.

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The film shows Mr. Dobson lecturing at a college in Pennsylvania, addressing a conference and, at the Randall Museum in California, showing how to grind telescope lenses. All the while, Mr. Dobson encourages the curious to examine the night skies. Mr. Jacobs said that one aim of the film was to spread Mr. Dobson's enthusiasm.

"We want people to explore the universe," he said. "We're saying, 'Please notice and take a look.' "

Speaking by telephone from an amateur telescope makers' convention in Vermont on Friday night, Mr. Dobson, 89, said that the filmmaker had understood his subject. "What the sidewalk astronomers do is very well depicted," he said.

Mr. Jacobs said that he was attracted to the public-spirited nature of the Dobson doctrine and that sharing his telescope with the public was a rewarding pastime.

"People go out onto the street to buy a quart of milk or see a movie, and someone shows them Saturn or the craters of the moon," he said. Once a couple of people stop to look through the telescope, he added, others inevitably line up. "People have a gravitational pull, just like planets."

One of the dozens who gazed through Mr. Jacobs's lens on Thursday night as he ranged up and down the street for about an hour seeking vantage points was Joan Quinn, 37, a publishing assistant from Astoria, Queens. She said that looking through the telescope brought back memories of standing with her father in a snowy field in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and watching a lunar eclipse when she was 10.

"It's inspiring and cool and magical," she said after viewing Jupiter.

A moment after Ms. Quinn departed, Todd Gladfelter, 29, a meteorologist who works in Boston and in Greenville, S.C., stepped up to the telescope.

"Meteorologists stare at the sky a lot, but usually we don't see the stars," he said, adding that although he had dropped out of an astronomy class in college because he found the course dry, he was energized by the unusual experience of viewing a far-flung planet from a street corner.

"Stars, to me, have always been kind of intriguing and mystical," he said. Then he nodded toward Mr. Jacobs and added, "So is this guy."