



Herald Photo by Richard Amery

James Durbano helps his son Wyatt, 3, use the telescope at the Big Sky observatory, Sunday afternoon.

# BIG EYE ON THE SKY

Observatory features powerful telescope that can be used to spot items in space

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“I just like to share the universe with people,” grinned James Durbano, an astronomy aficionado and president of the Big Sky Astronomical Society, while his three-year-old son, Wyatt, prowled around a brand, spanking new observatory. It is nestled next to the Twin Valley Dam, 20 kilometres west of Champion on Hwy. 529 — a tiny tin building at the foot of a hillside marked by barren plains echoed by sound of the quietly flowing Twin Valley Reservoir.

If you blink, you’ll miss it, as there are no signs posted yet.

The observatory opened only last weekend at the location to avoid light pollution from Alberta’s growing urban centres.

Yet it still can’t escape all the light pollution from Calgary, Lethbridge and smaller towns such as Claresholm and Nanton — just an estimated 96 per cent of it. To escape all light pollution, the observatory would have to be located in an even less accessible location,

and Durbano wants visitors — lots of them.

“The universe is a big place. You can’t see all of it, but you can see some of it from here — a lot more here than from other places,” he said.

He added the telescope, which was donated by another astronomer from a nearby observatory has an 11-inch diameter aperture, which makes it powerful enough to see all of the planets and most of the moons in the solar system, as well as other galaxies, novae, nebulas and much of the other wonders of the universe.

“People have a lot of questions about the universe. This observatory is very special because it allows people to connect to it and get closer to it,” Durbano continued.

He said it is an educational facility which can be used by seniors’ groups, scout troops, guides, 4-Hers and anybody else who is a stargazer at heart. Next weekend a home-schooled family who happen to be camping in the area will be among the first to take advantage of it to examine hopefully clear skies.

“We’re hoping a few thousand people a year will make the trip to come and use it,” said Durbano, who shares his time at the observatory with jobs as a substitute teacher

in Nanton, the Royal Tyrrell Museum and the Telus World of Science in Calgary and, of course, his wife, Laura, and son, Wyatt.

“Astronomy appeals to a broad variety of people, maybe not to the extent that it does to me, but I’ve found most people have questions about the universe,” he said.

He’d like to add a second observatory to the land, leased for the project by Alberta Environment, with a second telescope.

“With twice as many telescopes, we can have twice as many people,” he said.

One of the programs he is starting will allow people to look at the sun safely through the telescope with the help of a sun filter. He’s going to combine these “Sunny Sundays” with a program allowing people to bring their telescopes and get some tips and advice as to how to use them more effectively.

“It’s a coincidence, but sunspots run in cycles of 11 years and we’re seeing a minimum number of them right now, so I’ll be able to watch them and make a nice graph for the 11 years,” he said.

For more information about the Big Sky Observatory or to book a time to come and see it, email [info@bigsky.ab.ca](mailto:info@bigsky.ab.ca).