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Barefoot astronomer shares passion with stargazers

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At the end of Wilson Drive, a quiet street in the sleepy village of Marcellus, New York, is a house on a small hill that stands out from all the others. The home would look like any of the other low-key ranches on the block if not for the 12 solar panels installed to the roof, or the eight-foot-tall wind turbine perched on top. A vibrant greenhouse takes up half of this already modest dwelling.

But the crown jewel of the house is in the backyard in the form of large twin telescopes that date back more than forty years. After all, this is the home of Robert Piekieł, one of Central New York's most respected amateur astronomers. In his mind, no true stargazer's home would be complete without the proper equipment.

Piekieł has learned nearly everything there is to know about this particular hardware. Since 2006, he's authored 11 books on telescopes and still has more in the pipeline. A walking encyclopedia, Piekieł's most extensive work (a history of Celestron, his favorite telescope company), took up over 1,800 pages. A **CD-ROM copy of the book** is available for "lighter" reading.

Born in 1961, Piekieł's fascination with space began at an early age. "The first time I saw the rings of Saturn through a telescope as a ten-year-old, it was like a religious experience," Piekieł said, leaning on his impressive Celestron 22 telescope, his model of choice at the moment. "I think it is for everyone who has the chance to see it."

After his Saturn spotting coincided near the moment Armstrong took his first steps on the moon, Piekieł was hooked to the skies. Inspired by his eighth grade math teacher, Mike Palermi, to join the astronomy club at his school, Piekieł absorbed all of the knowledge he could. 40 years later, he still maintains a friendship with his former teacher and mentor.

Now, Piekieł is sharing all his knowledge monthly through astronomy events across the Central New York region. On August 12, he hosted the Perseids meteor shower viewing party at **Baltimore Woods Nature Center** in his hometown, Marcellus.

NASA reported that the 2015 viewing of the event was expected to be especially clear, as the moon would be early in its cycle, resulting in less of a glare in the night sky. Aside from the Geminids shower in December, the Perseids are one of the more popular astral occurrences.

Baltimore Woods got more than they bargained for when Piekieł was there

on a group night hike 16 years ago. While on a break in an open field, the group leader pointed out constellations to entertain the crowd, but soon found himself floundering. “I tapped him on the shoulder and told him I could help out,” Piekriel said. “The guide told me to ‘go for it.’” The program leader approached Piekriel the day after the hike in hopes of hiring him to lead astronomy events at the Nature Center. Piekriel’s answer was a quick, “Yes.”

In his time at the facility, Piekriel has become a well-known mainstay. Stacy Drake, the center’s marketing coordinator, is in charge of planning astronomy events. “Everyone around here knows him as Barefoot Bob,” she said. “That’s even what’s on his nametag.”

He earned his nickname because of his decision to go barefoot when he began having severe knee pains at age 21. “I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t move,” he said. “I found out I was going to need knee replacement surgery by the time I was 25.”

After noticing a sharp decrease in his leg pain while walking barefoot one day outside, he knew he was on to something. During the warmer months he would walk sans shoes until it became second nature. Through the months of April to October, Piekriel will usually be able to keep up his shoeless routine. “Once we start having to put on our gloves for winter,” he said. “I have to throw on the boots.”

Damian Allis, the founder of the **Central New York Observers**, a website and blog dedicated to astronomy, has known Piekriel for years. The pair frequently pitch in to assist each other’s seminars. “He’s the greatest exponent to amateur astronomy Central New York has,” Allis said. “Our community could certainly use a few more Barefoot Bobs running around.” Looking ahead, Piekriel envisions himself moving to an open piece of land in the countryside from which he can observe the skies nightly. He also has plans to delve more into optics and design his own telescopes. But for the time being, he’s content to keep teaching his seminars and bring people closer to the universe around them. For nearly two decades, Piekriel has been a fixture in the Central New York astronomy scene, with his feet firmly grounded on the earth and his head always looking toward the stars.

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