

Seeing stars on Prospect Hill

by Cynthia Wolfe Boynton

Far below Yale's Farnam Memorial Gardens, nighttime constellations of headlights, streetlights, and dim windows shine across the city. But it's the lights shining above that people are now coming to see at Yale's new student observatory on clear evenings.

The public viewing nights began in 2000 at the student observatory atop Pierson-Sage Garage. In 2003, when renovations on the garage began, the new observatory was built. It will be dedicated in May as the Leitner Family Observatory.

The stars draw anywhere from 5 to 75 people every first and third Thursday of the month. At these free public viewing nights, graduate and undergraduate students of astronomy give students, professors, kids, and all other comers a close-up look at stars, planets, and galaxies. They use a collection of telescopes. The largest is a historic hundred-year-old Reed eight-inch refractor telescope that Yale astronomy students spent more than a year restoring.

"The seasons have a lot of say in what stars we can and can't see, but we never have a strict agenda," says graduate student Hugh Crowl, who has served as viewing coordinator for several years. "We're happy to take a look at whatever our visitors want to see."

On March 3, star clusters in the Perseus constellation and the crystal-clear rings of Saturn have visitors oohing and aahing as they look through the huge telescopes in the observatory's two rotating domed towers. Even outside on the grass, visitors are pointing and staring at the bright, white Pleiades star cluster.

"I never get tired of looking at stars, and it's neat when you can share your enthusiasm," says Meredith Hughes '05, an astronomy major and copresident of the undergraduate Society for Telescopes and Astronomical Research and Recreation at Yale (STARRY). "It's amazing what you can see with a telescope even from downtown New Haven."

Also amazing is the zeal some people bring to the 90-minute viewings. This time of year—when stars in the Scorpius, Libra, and Hercules constellations are among those most visible—visitors often bring picnics, blankets, and lawn chairs to the gardens. "It's great when families come," Crowl says. "It can be a lovely night out."

