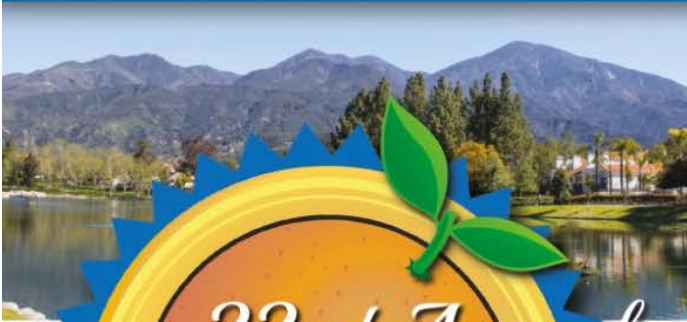


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What Every Parent's Talking About

parentingOC



22nd Annual

READERS' CHOICE AWARDS



SPECIAL SECTIONS: PRE-K-12 EDUCATION, AFTERSCHOOL ACTIVITIES

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A collage of Readers' Choice Awards 2024 Winners including Aqua-Tots, Creative Party for Kids, Dana Wharf, Environmental Nature Center, OC Fair & Event Center, Saddleback Valley Unified School District, and Sgt. Pepperoni's Pizza Store.

Cover design by Kevin Yoshimasu

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Family Wellness

By Shawn Price

Starry Nights Astronomy Nights at The Nature Reserve at Rancho Mission Viejo offer wonder of the night sky.

If there's one thing to love about a night spent looking at the stars, it's the time travel.

Second would be the serene feeling it provides as you scan the universe, pondering the big picture. But first, yeah, it's that time travel thing.

Looking up at the same sky Galileo saw in 1610, these are all the same celestial bodies that convinced him the earth moved around the sun. The same that convinced Copernicus 70 years before, and all the guys before him, dating back to Aristarchus of Samos in the third century.

Right now, we're looking at the stars and planets with them on Astronomy Night at The Nature Reserve at Rancho Mission Viejo. They make good company, with 20 other folks here to spend a few hours off their phones, looking up instead of down.

In a protected valley off Ortega Highway, one of the best stargazing spots in Orange County, the light pollution is muted about as much as can be in 2024. Dana Point and San Juan Capistrano can seem like Broadway if you're trying to look out a telescope. Darkness is key and the darkness, certainly in this context, is soothing.

"I love the relaxed atmosphere of an Astronomy Night on The Nature Reserve," says Leeta Latham, the reserve's executive director. "Visitors enjoy storytelling and a tour of the stars while relaxing on picnic benches or their own folding chairs. In between the storytelling, visitors can move from telescope to telescope, as they gaze at the universe and ask questions of the astronomers. We also serve hot chocolate and cookies — what could be better?"

Family-friendly and physically un-demanding, we're just minutes from the freeway, but it's a different world to a slew of suburbanites in desperate need of finding their North Star once again.

Latham says she notices a real "sense of amazement and wonder," in guests during the once-a-month events.

"There are a lot of 'ooohhhs' and 'ahhhhs' we hear from visitors as they look through the telescopes," she says. "There is also

a lot of laughter. Part of an Astronomy Night is viewing the galaxy through telescopes, but part of the evening includes a star tour of the night sky. Astronomers also tell stories about the stars and constellations."

What astronauts refer to as the "overview effect," or the change in how they see life on the ground after spending time looking at Earth from orbit, finds a parallel in people standing in a dark, peaceful meadow with their feet very much on ground.

"Experiencing a night sky full of stars is breathtaking and awe-inspiring," Latham says. "I've been fortunate to work in many places with great views of the night sky. I've also been lucky to witness the wonder and awe others experience gazing into a dark sky. Getting to see a student or visitor marvel at the galaxy for the first time is such a treat and really impactful. ... Visitors are consumed with wonder and curiosity as the evening progresses."

But there are surprises each night, not all in the skies above. "In addition to being a beautiful place to see the stars, we often see wildlife, which is always a welcome surprise. Depending on the season, we'll see owls, bats, coyotes, toads, frogs and tarantulas."

The reconnecting with the natural world makes the evening fly by, like the often seen International Space Station. It leaves families a little less stressed and a little more connected to each other as they head back to Ortega Highway. But Latham wants to send them away talking about the experience.

"I want them sharing with one another what they saw, what surprised them, what they found exciting or even scary," she says. "And of course, I want them to talk about what they want to experience when they come back to The Nature Reserve, whether it's for another Astronomy Night, a family hike or other activities and experiences here."

And like Galileo, Copernicus and those who spent their nights looking at the stars long ago, we can be right with them, finding wonder in the dark.