

STARRY NIGHTS

by Rich Warren

Visitors to the John Glenn Astronomy Park (JGAP) can get close-up looks of Jupiter's colorful bands or see jagged edges of craters on the moon. They may even glimpse a fiery meteor shoot across the night sky. But what elicits the most "oohs" and "ahs," according to JGAP Director Brad Hoehne, are the rings of Saturn. "They take people's breath away," he says. Globular clusters of up to a million stars in what appears to be one small area of the sky are another favorite. Hoehne describes the clusters as "swarming snowballs of light, like someone's hit a diamond with a hammer."

JGAP is far removed from light pollution that blocks night sky views in most of Ohio. Inside the observatory with its "roll-off" roof is the fourth largest telescope in Ohio, which Hoehne calls "the 'Wow' Telescope," due to visitors' reactions as they gaze upon the moon, the planets, nebulae and far-off galaxies. Programming at JGAP, due to resume when social distancing

restrictions allow, takes place Friday and Saturday evenings from March through early November and focuses on timely astronomical phenomena.

A large circular plaza outside the observatory has several interesting features. Six slots in the surrounding wall catch rising and setting sun rays on the first day of each season. A standing sundial allows participants to approximate the time by standing on the spot representing the current month and watching where their shadow falls on the sundial.

On the adjacent two-acre lawn, visitors can privately contemplate the heavens, peering through their own binoculars, which can also be put to use back at cabins or campsites for views of the Milky Way or hazy nebulae. One of the amateur astronomers who've set up their own telescopes might also share a quick peek. "Most people say their love of astronomy began with a look through a telescope," Hoehne said. "At JGAP, we're all about making that happen." ▲



JOHN GLENN ASTRONOMY PARK LAURIA WATLO BLAKE & BRAD HOEHNE