

Getting Into (Astro) Gear

By Chris Wilcox

According to Night Sky Network's ranking (NASA 2025) of club outreach activities, the Astronomy Club of Asheville (ACA) is one of the busiest in the nation. Weather permitting, we hold two public stargazes monthly and give numerous solar and nighttime presentations to kids throughout the school year. Though key parts of the Blue Ridge Parkway remain closed in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, we're working to resume a steady cadence of pop-ups, which allow us to share the night sky when the short-term forecasts predict good viewing conditions. We maintain loaner scopes, publish a world-class calendar, award several scholarships annually, and host presenters at ten meetings in a typical year. But there's another less obvious avenue we've found to be very effective in fostering astronomy throughout western North Carolina: telescope sales.

Or, maybe we should say gear sales. Like many clubs, we receive offers of all manner of used astronomy equipment, ranging from "hobby killers" on shaky mounts to solid scopes, eyepieces, filters, lasers, and, occasionally, high-end astrographs and heavy-duty tripods. Donations arrive from various sources, including underutilized gifts, inherited items, and gently used equipment given to us by area astronomers as they upgrade their rigs. And, we're shameless: when folks contact us for assistance selling their gear, a member will likely reply asking if they would rather donate it to us instead!

The club's sales of astronomical gear are a win-win situation. Donors of quality items can often take a deduction on their taxes, and they can always feel good about supporting our non-profit, publicly engaged club. Low selling prices allow more folks to explore the hobby using expertly rehabilitated equipment, which

is good for the long-term health of the hobby and the club. Finally, proceeds from these sales have become a significant portion of our club's income.

Other Astronomy League-affiliated clubs can probably replicate the ACA's success with gear sales, but it certainly helps to have someone like Paul Henze. He's our secret sauce, running the sales program like a finely tuned machine. Before moving to Asheville, Paul helped build a planetarium and observatory at the Bear Branch Nature Center in Maryland. Working with other members of his local club at the time, the Westminster Astronomy Society (WASI), Paul's optical bench craftsmanship helped prove a concept for an occulter that might have flown in formation with the James Webb Space Telescope, allowing it to capture direct images of exoplanets (UMBRAS 2004). Over the years, he has built several telescopes, adjustable observing chairs, parallel binocular mounts, and many other items that make astronomy easier for people nationwide.

A lifetime WASI member, Paul joined the ACA soon after he and his wife Paula moved from Maryland to North Carolina in 2014. Paul is a regular volunteer at our outreach programs and has done extensive work maintaining and improving the club's observatory at Grassland Mountain. At Grassland during an August 2020 stargaze, Paul approached one of our web admins, Jerry Sherman, proposing that we add a page on the site for telescope sales. Jerry completed the requisite coding quickly, and our sales program was off to the races.

When someone contacts us about donating their astronomy gear, Paul usually drives to the donor's location to collect the items. During the periodic flood tides, all the donated gear may displace his car from the garage. His genius for tinkering is well suited to getting the equipment into working order, often with modifications that improve on the original design. A deep stock of components, tripods, and accessories allows Paul to mix and match as he creates some nice scope/mount combinations. We set prices lower than are typical for comparable used equipment, thus making it affordable to start or grow in the hobby. Club member Chris Wilcox recalls his first purchase from the ACA as revelatory. "My starter scope was an SCT on a go-to mount, which I received as a gift. That was great, but I didn't start really learning my way around the sky until I dropped \$250 for that 8-inch Dob and began star hopping."

Occasionally, Paul will select a restored item as a prize for the raffle that ACA vice president Bob Lewis runs at our regular meetings. More often, though, Paul



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If you can help, please contact
Chuck Allen at president@astroleague.org.

works with Jerry to create a listing. Jerry will use Paul's brief description, suggested price, and photos to flesh out a detailed and nicely formatted advertisement on our award-winning website's "For Sale" page. We don't offer shipping or a guarantee on electronic components. Our treasurer, Ilene Aronson, confirms payment using a no-frills PayPal form. Jerry marks the item as sold, and Paul follows up with the buyer to arrange delivery. He's apt to drive across several mountain counties for a rendezvous, at which he may impart a few observing tips and throw in an eyepiece not included in the original ad. Before heading home, Paul will invite the new telescope owner to attend upcoming ACA activities such as stargazes or lectures. Several current members mark their introduction to the club via Paul and the sales program he coordinates with grace and dedication.

We have a few closing thoughts on trash scopes and hobby killers. Paul and Todd Creamer, a fellow member with long ties to multiple clubs, were recently discussing what to do when approached with offers of dubious instruments like an f/15 refractor sized for 0.925-inch eyepieces featuring plastic lens elements. They agreed that the club could not provide a tax letter with such a telescope, but a question lingered. Are we duty-bound to accept the gift just to consign it to the landfill? Scavenging parts would yield little value, but allowing it to wind up at a thrift store might frustrate a budding observer's dreams. Another approach is politely declining, explaining that its highest purpose is as a decoration. Still, some old-timers recollect cutting their teeth on wonky department store telescopes and falling in love with astronomy despite early use of sub-standard equipment.

How does your club handle this type of situation? Contact us with questions or to compare notes: inquiry@AstroAsheville.org.

References:

NASA, Night Sky Network, "Stars in the Network"
nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/stars/

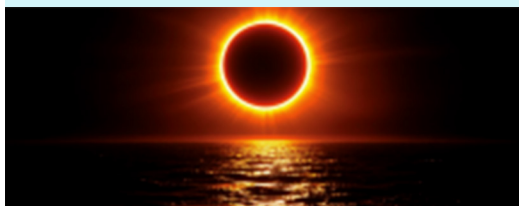
UMBRAS
umbras.org/ground_testing.html

Did you know...

The Astronomy Genealogy Project (astrogen.aas.org) allows you to search for the thesis advisor and PhD students of your favorite 20th century astronomers. Some of these scientific genealogies are quite interesting (look up Neil DeGrasse Tyson, for example).

EVEREN EXPEDITIONS

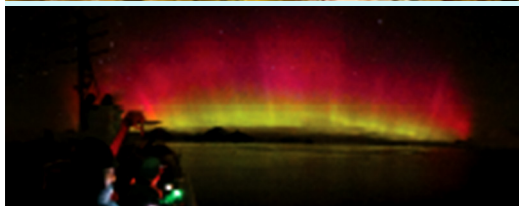
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