

# STAR PARTIES

## LESSONS LEARNED BY ONE OLD TIMER

**Authors: Peter Bealo and Charlie McDonald Project Astro-Boston and the Amateur Telescope Makers of Boston**

I've been an amateur astronomer for over 25 years now, having been bitten by the bug the first time I viewed Saturn at a public star party. By the time I was 15 I too had begun participating in public star parties with my local astronomy club. These were generally focussed events where an observing theme-of-the-night kept most of us observing a common object, be it Mars, Saturn, Moon, etc. If too many of us were observing one object, someone just picked another object to observe and watched the waiting line migrate to his scope. I thought this was all there was to star parties for over 20 years, until I participated in a Charlie McDonald run star party. Now I know I was just a novice despite my years.

Charlie is a recently retired Purchasing Manager from the Aerospace industry. Until his retirement he never owned a telescope, didn't belong to a club, didn't read about astronomy. Nothing. Now just a few short years later Charlie organizes and executes at least one major star party per month in the Reading Massachusetts area. From his professional background he brings an organization level and marketing vision I have never before experienced...and the kids love it! In preparation for this article Charlie provided a detailed, bulleted, 5 page set of instructions on how to run a star party from start to finish. We'll eventually get these up on a website in total, but for now I'd like to discuss just a few of the aspects of Charlie's star parties that makes them so successful for everyone involved.

### **1. Advance communications and setting expectations:**

Once contacted to do a star party, go and personally discuss group expectations vs. what you can deliver with the requestor. If a school group, provide the teachers up front with a list of prominent objects to be viewed, handouts on any of these objects you can provide, and if possible, other references about the objects. If at all possible the teacher should have time to digest information well in advance of the pupils. Did all the handouts contain a reference of how to contact your astronomy club?? If its a multi-class star party, involve the PTA from the start, they can help with refreshments, etc. Speaking of refreshments, when asked how the school or PTA could help, did you mention that most of your helpers will be coming directly from work and missing dinner...some light snacks or a pot of chili will go far in keeping the astronomers happy and willing to come back again. Unless you're in the Southwestern desert, set a raindate.

#### **1.A. Communicate with the astronomers:**

Don't just hope that help will show up to help out. Personally call your contacts at least a month in advance, then follow up at two weeks, one week and one day. Understand what equipment each astronomer will bring, and aim for a variety including a big dob, something optimized for planetary observing and binoculars. No scope is too small. Discuss what objects you'll want each astronomer to view and try to get copies of handouts into their hands before the event. No surprises. Assume 1/3 of your helpers won't make it (I know I'm guilty of that...Sorry Charlie!!).

### **1.C. Communicate with the children:**

Have handouts prepared and available as they walk into your event or distributed earlier. For younger kids, having some kind of paper games or coloring sheets helps keep interest. For older kids, have a set of "scavenger hunt" questions for them to try and answer to get a prize. Astronomy Magazine, Sky and Telescope and ASP all have catalogs and observing handouts that can be great to hand out. A couple phone calls will get cases of this material sent to you at no cost.

### **2. Organize the flow**

All too often an event for 200+ people just has a start and ending times. People arrive en-masse and overwhelm the 5 or 6 astronomers present. Long lines frustrate the children and astronomers. And nobody has much fun.

In a McDonald event groups of people, generally divided by classroom, are given arrival times staggered by 15 or 20 minutes. So classroom A arrives at 7:00, classroom B at 7:20, etc. Visitors don't go right to the telescopes, but instead are vectored into a 15 or 20 minute slide show about what they'll be seeing through the scopes and perhaps some other specialty topic such as comets and asteroids or recent Hubble Space Telescope findings. Once through the slide show they have a better grasp of what they'll actually be seeing and are ready to hit the scopes. As group A bundles up to go outside, group B is just arriving for their slide show. The telescope lines are kept reasonably short, only one or two classes are generally around the telescopes at any one time. There is greater opportunity to converse with the astronomers, its less like a Soviet bread line.

With a flow outlined above, more people can be handled in a more personal way by fewer astronomers.

### **3. Publicize the event:**

Call your local newspaper and TV stations a week before the event. Local papers in particular are starving for good events to report on. Charlie's events are covered by the Reading papers almost every month, and he generally get a picture on the front page. Before the event, think about a couple good "one

liners" you can give a reporter, they don't know anything about astronomy and are grateful for any help you can give them. Did you give the reporter several copies of your handout (they'll lose the first)?? Make sure all your helpers aren't dressed like convicts...someone presentable may need to be photographed. Scaring the public is a bad thing.

#### **4. After the event:**

Call your helpers and thank them. If you made the papers, send each a copy of the article. Show the article at your next club meeting to spark interest for helping at the next event.

Did you receive a thank you letter from the school? Send a copy to each of your helpers.

Did the school offer you a small honorarium? Don't turn it down, giving it helps them understand that your time is valuable. Take the money and spend it on astronomy books for the school!

I've seen Charlie host a library star party where he received a small honorarium and the local paper covered the event with a first page story (by the way...you can ask to be on the first page...don't be shy). Next, Charlie used the honorarium to purchase books, and then got newspaper coverage AGAIN at a book donation event staged at the library. Of course, each book had a sticker that said "Provided by the Amateur Telescope Makers of Boston" along with contact information, and the newspaper printed information about the club twice as well.

I hope these ideas and methods are of assistance to each of you. They do increase the workload on the organizer a little, but they make the actual event run very smoothly, give the participants and guests a better event, and help channel interested people into the local astronomy club. Go out there and give these methods a try and let me know how they work. Messages can be sent to [pbealo@mediaone.net](mailto:pbealo@mediaone.net).

Copies of this document can be found at <http://www.atmob.org>