

Stargazers remember their first planetarium shows

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Do you remember your first planetarium experience?

For me, it was under the dome at the old COSI on E. Broad Street when I was 6 years old. It was the first time I had seen the constellations, and I remember being awestruck by the sheer number of stars overhead. I asked three Science page columnists to write about their memories. Enjoy.

– Mark D. Somerson

Kenneth Hicks

Professor of physics and astronomy at Ohio University in Athens

If you've never seen what the sky looks like in the clear desert sky, it's a sight to behold.

As a boy growing up in Cleveland, I had never seen the Milky Way. There was too much humidity and light pollution from the city.

My first view of the “real” night sky, as ancient civilizations would have seen it, was at a planetarium. The show was unforgettable – the stars as we see them in the city, then darker as seen in the countryside, and finally a spectacular dark night, like in the desert.

My seventh-grade field trip to the planetarium had a profound impact on me. Suddenly, I was hit with the vastness of space, with its billions of stars.

Another thing a planetarium can do is to speed up time. You can watch Mars racing across the sky – a full year summarized in a few minutes. It's especially fun to watch the retrograde motion, where a planet

appears to suddenly go in the opposite direction, as viewed from Earth.

The Southern Hemisphere has a different skyscape with constellations we never see in America. But you don't need to travel to Chile to see these constellations; just go to your local planetarium. It will take you to places you've never been before. Better yet, take a kid with you.

Tom Statler

Director of the Astrophysical Institute at Ohio University

My first planetarium visit really was a life-changing experience.

It was 1971, at the Minolta Planetarium at De Anza College in Cupertino, Calif. I don't remember what the show was about, but I remember how it started.

With music playing, the operator took us through sunset. We saw the sun sink toward the horizon. The dome turned a deep blue. One by one, the stars appeared, as our eyes adapted to the dark. We saw the night sky, just as we saw it every night from our suburban homes. The operator pointed out the constellations. Having logged some hours stargazing with my big brother, I was already a pretty obnoxious know-it-all on the subject.

But then he said something strange: "This isn't really what the sky looks like," he said. "If we could get away from the city, we'd see something more like this."

And that was the moment.

The sky went BLACK. Every star I knew was now a blazing pinpoint. The places I had always thought were empty were suddenly filled with thousands of stars that I had never imagined existed. I was lost in the sheer number of stars. I couldn't even find my favorite constellations.

It was jaw-droppingly, gut-wrenchingly awesome. My mom tells me that, a few months later, I insisted on signing up for a class that the planetarium was offering Saturday mornings. I don't remember much about it, but it was way better than cartoons.

Tom Burns

Director of Ohio Wesleyan University's Perkins Observatory in Delaware

Stargazing was tough in Youngstown in the early 1960s, especially for a

10-year old with nothing to look through but \$3 plastic binoculars.

The sickly orange lights from Steeltown burned brightly all night and washed out the fainter stars. Still, out into the dark I stumbled to see the moons of Jupiter and the Pleiades star cluster.

I was desperate to learn the sky. Was there a better place than in a planetarium, a kind of giant star map? So the family drove to the nearest planetarium, in exotic Cleveland. So many stars! The Milky Way was a revelation – a faint strip of light with Cygnus, the Swan, hovering over it.

It was my best view of the sky until I attended the College of Wooster, buried deep in Ohio's "dark-sky" country. Wrapped in a warm summer breeze, I saw the undulant glow of the Milky Way, a cascading river of unresolved stars. Chock full of enthusiasm, I visited that Cleveland planetarium again. As the house lights faded, I wondered, "Where is the warm summer breeze?"

The lens for the star Vega had fallen out. The brightest star in the summer sky was big as a baseball. Even so, I wanted to shout, "Look at the white swan Cygnus flying over the silvery river of light."

But I held my tongue as the speaker droned on about the weather on Jupiter. Planetariums are helpful educational tools, but if you want a real show, go outside. The real universe, a velvety dome filled with uncountable stars, is waiting there for you.

If you would like to share your first memories of planetariums, e-mail me at msomerson@dispatch.com and I'll post them on the Science blog at Dispatch.com.

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