

## Star-studded Spectacle above the City's Subway

Celebrities abound in the Big Apple. The city is home to Broadway divas, titans of finance and industry, movie and music industry legends and some of the most famous faces in sport. But on the evening of Friday, June 4, stars of a different kind were electrifying the New York summer night. And the crowds came out in force with hundreds of people huddled on the grass and filling every available seat for an event that went beyond the latest Lady Gaga concert in terms of personal expression and passion.

On that night, an eclectic army of amateur astronomers and the merely curious gathered in Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan Island to celebrate all things celestial. In the looming shadow of the scale model of NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, experienced and novice stargazers alike trained their telescopes on the sky and searched the heavens. The stargazing event, part of the weeklong World Science Festival, exemplified a time when the wonders of the natural world became part of the city's fabric. Lectures, educational events, street fairs and symposiums raised the visibility of scientific subjects from neuroscience and nanotechnology to, of course, astronomy.

The communal experience in Battery Park was heightened by the warm summer weather and the inspiring views of the Statue of Liberty lit up in New York Harbor. Though cloud cover made stargazing beside the point, participants happily traded stories of galaxies glimpsed and how to get the most aperture for the money.

Greg Barker from Milford, Conn., an engineer for a computer storage company, came down for the night. As president of the Astronomical Society of New Haven, he described himself as a big fan of the James Webb Space Telescope, as well as Hubble and Chandra. If telescopes appeared on trading cards, he would collect them. Greg said he became hooked on astronomy at the age of 12 when he saw Mars for the first time. His 12-year-old Dobsonian telescope, more than 6 feet high, was based on a simple design from the late 1950s. With an aperture of 18 inches, it resembled a yellow cannon and caught the attention of the crowd. Size certainly matters when it comes to standing out in this crowd.

Antoine Ribaux, a 20-something IT consultant, had emigrated from Paris, France, to New York City for his career. His Celestron 6-inch reflector was a good deal smaller than the Dobsonian. But he stressed it had the advantage of being portable. He was able to easily take the small and lightweight scope with him on business and indulge his favorite hobby. Believing he was an astronaut in a previous life, the Frenchman was pleased that Arianespace would provide the launch vehicle for the James Webb Space Telescope. He recalled his most exciting moment in astronomy occurred when he was 10 and staying up past his bedtime to stargaze with a small, cheap telescope given as a gift. That night, believing he had discovered a new solar system, he rushed into his father's room and woke him up to announce the news. Antoine's father looked through the scope and announced that the new solar system was, in fact, Jupiter and its Galilean moons. Dad went back to bed. Antoine continues his search for new solar systems and awaits his Nobel Prize.

Though the event was geared toward amateurs, eminent scientists joined for a panel discussion moderated by Miles O'Brien. Scientists mingled with the crowd following the talk. Those in attendance included Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of New York City's Hayden Planetarium, Dr. John Mather, Nobel Laureate and senior project scientist for the James Webb Space Telescope, Dr. John Grunsfeld, deputy director of the Space Telescope Science Institute and the NASA astronaut who helped fix the Hubble Telescope, and Dr. Heidi Hammel, co-director of research at the Space Science Institute and a scientist on the Webb Telescope Team.

On the panel, Hammel inspired those gathered by mentioning how just the night before an amateur astronomer had documented a never-before-seen object. With astronomy, she emphasized, every night offered fresh possibilities for discovery.

Described by moderator Miles O'Brien as "the man who demoted Pluto," Tyson overcame the initial chorus of "boos" to totally win over the crowd. His energy and passion were infectious. Long after the panel had broken up, he remained sitting casually on the edge of the stage, spinning humorous tales of space science and surrounded by dozens of people in no great hurry to get home to more earthly concerns.

Perhaps the most insightful observation of the night came from Maybelle, a 6-year-old from Brooklyn. She came without a telescope but accompanied by her father Sebastien. She was not so much interested in the panel discussion or the myriad of amateur telescopes. What caught her eye was the scale model of the James Webb lit up in red light. "It looks like an ice cream cone," she said, describing the model's mirror made up of 18 hexagons.

Perhaps the warm weather inspired that comment, but to this eyewitness the model mirror did, indeed, look a bit like a sugar cone.

It was time to stop talking about mapping the Milky Way. I called it a night and went off looking for an iced latte.