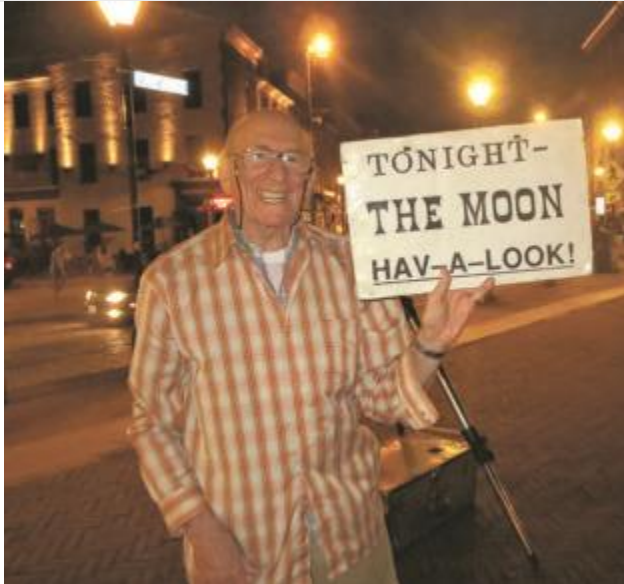


Street-corner astronomer says goodnight



Herman Heyn spent 31 years showing Baltimoreans the stars and planets from his telescope.

By: [Judy Colbert](#)

Star light, star bright...just a little dimmer now.

Herman Heyn — teacher, soldier, matchmaker, writer, featured character in Jon Jefferson’s novel *Wave of Terror*, and astronomer — is hanging up his telescope for the last time. At 88, Heyn has been Baltimore’s “Street-Corner Astronomer” for the past 31 years.

The avuncular Waverly resident is a self-taught astronomer who started his street corner life on November 13, 1987 when, at the age of 56, he took his telescope out for an evening’s view. He invited people to look through the scope, and he explained what they were seeing.

Heyn’s advancing age and the arthritis in his neck, with its resultant pinched nerves, now make it difficult to handle the telescope, even with the assistance of the teenager next door who has become his right-hand man.

Viewing the stars and planets

Since he began, Heyn has helped people scan the skies 2,857 times, he calculates. That was at the Inner Harbor, Charles Village and Fells Point, where he'd set up at the Thames St. end of Broadway Square with an 8" Schmidt-Cassegrain reflector telescope.

His latest telescope is his fourth. He bought his first one in 1981 for \$1,300. Today, with all the additional computerization, a similar unit would cost about \$2,500 to \$3,000.

Heyn would set up the telescope, aim it toward something gasp-worthy, and then let you "Hav-A-Look" as his sign read. You might see the moon, the planets, and some stars. He often gave viewers a yellow Post-it note that read, "I Saw Saturn" (or Mars or Jupiter).

His enthusiasm has been contagious. He has inspired a couple of people to go into the field of astronomy, others to buy a telescope and even a marriage proposal.

Heyn didn't charge a fee, but he definitely accepted contributions. He made \$10 his first night and \$40 the next. He went to City Hall the next day and applied for a license. He soon added a plastic cowboy hat, mounted between the scope's legs, as a subtle collection plate.

Over the years, Heyn said the contributions from his skywatchers have earned him a total of \$200,000 (which, divided by 31 years means, on average, not quite \$6,500 a year). "It's all reported to the IRS," he hastened to say, and the money earned "supplements my meager Social Security retirement funds."

Over the past 30-plus years, Heyn has repeatedly received many questions. As in, "Can you see the flag on the moon from Earth?" "No," said Heyn. "A satellite circling the moon can, though."

Dreaming of the moon

"Would you want to go to Mars or the moon?" others have asked. "I'd want to go to the moon," he replied. "If someone tapped me on the shoulder today and said, 'Get your toothbrush, you're leaving tomorrow,' I'd be there.

"But not Mars. That's too much of a time investment, involving seven months to fly there, two years for a window to return, seven months back."

While many people tell him that the sky is so inspiring it must have been created by a higher power, that's not Heyn's belief. "The universe is too big and beautiful for any god to have dreamed it up," he believes.

Nor does Heyn believe that there's life in outer space, explaining, "There are billions and trillions of stars. The conditions on earth are so unique that to be duplicated someplace else is real improbable."

The one thing Heyn hasn't seen in the skies is a flying saucer. He'd like to, he said, but he's never heard of any astronomer who has.

Meeting strangers all the time has given Heyn a lot of self-confidence and honed his street performing skills. And, of course, he's learned a lot about astronomy along the way.

Just because Heyn is retiring from schlepping the telescope out into the world doesn't mean he's given up on astronomy, however. He is looking forward to addressing seniors groups and other organizations. Just give him a call at (410) 889-0460.

Heyn's big concern at the moment is that, come the summer of 2019, "Jupiter and Saturn, two of my three best objects (the moon is the third) will be close enough to easily telescope in one evening. I worry that I may find it hard to resist their call."

Judy Colbert is a Glen Burnie-based freelance writer and published author.