

ASTRONOMICAL LEAGUE PROGRAMS

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Astronomy Day: A Potential Passport to a Lifetime of Astronomy

In last year's comments in this column, I highlighted two of the beginner observing programs of the Astronomical League: The Sky Puppies beginning program for children; and the Urban Observing program, catering to amateur astronomers who seldom have access to darker skies but can observe brighter objects from their cities.

This year I would like to go in a slightly different direction. Many organizations are setting goals for engaging more youth in their organizations, but how does this apply to the Astronomical League and astronomy in general? Existing members can provide a good deal of mentoring to not only their new members, including youthful members, but also those new potential members you may meet at community events such as the Astronomy Day celebrations.

How many of you have heard of Astronomy Day, the international celebration of the science of astronomy, celebrated in the spring and fall each year? International Astronomy Day was first observed by Doug Berger in 1973, who was the president of the Astronomical Association of Northern California at that time. His aim was to increase the general public's interest in the vast field of astronomy. He set up telescopes at various locations for the public.

The spirit of International Astronomy Day dates back to 2800 BCE, starting with Stonehenge. The Astronomical League's involvement with this annual event has been ongoing for more than 40 years. In 2023, we just celebrated the 40th anniversary of Gary Tomlinson's being at the helm of the program for the Astronomical League, with additional sponsorship from *Sky & Telescope* magazine and the American Astronomical Society. Gary has chosen to pass the leadership torch after his many years of excellent service as Astronomy Day Coordinator.

The Astronomy Day program is reorganizing with new leadership from the Astronomical League and *Sky & Telescope*/AAS. The goal is to introduce Astronomy Day to a new generation and expand the familiarity with current astronomers. We intend to use all the tools at our disposal to make this happen. Communication, using not only traditional methods, but through social media outlets and other venues, is a first step—places where many youth receive their information.



Figure 1—Astronomy Day logo



Figure 2—2022 Oct. 1, Astronomy Day activities of the Minnesota Astronomical Society—they built a replica of the Apollo 11 Lunar Excursion Module.

Solar observing is a tradition of many current Astronomy Day activities. When you get your properly filtered telescope set up for viewing, encourage your visitors to explore the mysteries of the sun. If you have younger members volunteering at your event, let them lead the interaction with younger guests. This serves two purposes: often younger members can relate more easily to their peers. Also, as you may or may not know, the Astronomical League has many annual awards programs in addition to the Observing Award programs. One is the Horkheimer/Smith Service Award, which was established by the late Jack Horkheimer and rewards a high-school-age person who gives service to their astronomical society or other related group. The top finisher receives prize money and other related benefits.



Figure 3—The sign above the Gravity Buckets reads “These buckets demonstrate the comparative gravity on the various planets. The Earth bucket weighs 6 pounds, compare what this feels like on the Moon & planets.”

If you encounter young people who are involved with physics and astronomy research, please encourage them to consider entering the League’s National Young Astronomer Award program competition for high school students. Several rewards are included, including an expenses-paid trip to the national convention of the Astronomical League, scheduled each summer. This includes an opportunity to showcase the young person’s research project on a national stage.

Give out your society or group’s business card with a QR code embedded on the card so guests can easily find out more information about the group.

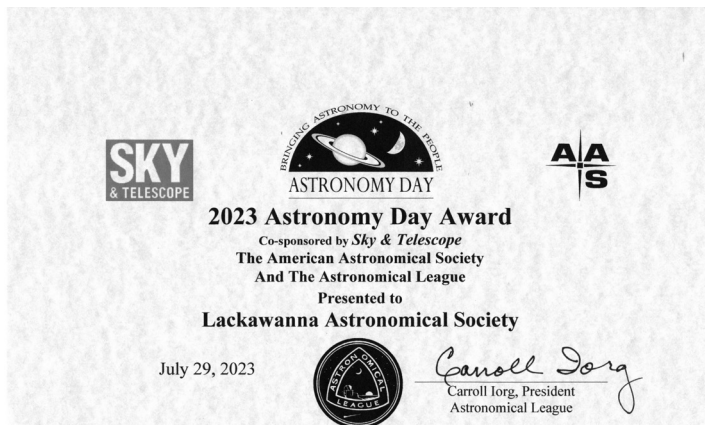


Figure 4—The certificate for the 2023 winner of the Astronomy Day program, the Lackawanna Astronomical Society, located in Fleetville, Pennsylvania

If your guests have a fun day at your Astronomy Day event, with prompt follow-up by your group, they are more likely to take the next step of joining your club and then learning the night sky, and perhaps moving up to becoming an active night-sky observer.

Please check out our new website often at www.astroleague.org and follow the new Astronomy Day project as we reinvent this activity for the next generation.



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