

Confessions of a Teenage Docent
By Jackie Hurley

There are a few questions that always seem to find me while working at the Cameron Park Community Observatory in Placerville. Some are fairly expected, like the distance to the closest star or how nebulae are formed. These are questions I have an answer for. However, once in a blue moon (no pun intended), a question blindsides me. “So, do you teach at the college here?” I am mistaken for an instructor at the adjacent El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College. It *is* dark when these questions are asked, so some misconceptions are permissible. In reality, I have yet to graduate high school and attend college, let alone work as an instructor. At 17, I’m the youngest docent of the pack.

I started working at the observatory the summer after I finished middle school three years ago. I am part of the original group of docents that have worked since the observatory’s opening in 2006. The only things I knew about astronomy at the time were the location of the Big Dipper and that we reside in the Milky Way galaxy. That was it. In the beginning, I was so out of my league among lifelong stargazers that all I felt I was able to do was greet people and guard the trusty clicker for counting patrons. I kept my mouth shut for the first year and absorbed all the information around me, storing it for my future spiels. Eventually, I was trusted with a 6 inch manual scope to use outside the entrance. I became exceedingly familiar with the moon and any planet that was in the sky at the time.

I moved workplaces as new docents began to sign up, working with the 14 inch scopes and the camera scope that broadcasts objects onto a screen inside the viewing room. I could recognize a handful of objects by sight and grappled with their names, often a string of numbers from various astronomical catalogs. I’m working scopes and explaining the objects entirely on my own now, using all those stored tidbits from that silent year. I’ve become so familiar with the song-and-dance that I can run a program throughout the night and not have to repeat anything. New docents listen to me and wonder if they will ever reach *my* level. This particular turn of events truly surprised me. I’m used to being the newbie. I have become the experienced one; I was the mentor for new volunteers.

I’m not the only teenage docent, but we are few and far between. Several of them have graduated and moved away to college, as I will next fall. Leaving a place I’ve been frequenting since I was 14 will be tough, but the change will come whether I’m ready for it or not. What started as an interest turned into a hobby, which may turn into a lifelong pursuit. Only time will tell.

Oh, and even now, I’m still in charge of the counting clicker.

The Cameron Park Rotary Community Observatory is always looking for volunteers that want to learn more about astronomy and share their knowledge with the public. See our website, www.communityobservatory.com for more information.