



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 5, 2009

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WHITE HOUSE STAR PARTY KICKS OFF A BUSY SEASON OF ASTRONOMY EVENTS

A bountiful fall harvest of astronomy events kicks off this week with a star party at the White House. On Wednesday evening, October 7th, professional and amateur astronomers will set up more than 20 telescopes on the White House lawn to give President Obama, his family, and a group of lucky middle-school students an up-close-and-personal look at lunar craters and mountains, the giant planet Jupiter and its moons, and other celestial wonders. The event coincides with the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first glimpse of the heavens through a telescope, a milestone being celebrated worldwide throughout 2009, declared by the United Nations as the International Year of Astronomy (IYA2009).

According to a statement issued on October 2nd by the White House press office, the star party is being held "to highlight the President's commitment to science, engineering, and math education as the foundation of this nation's global technological and economic leadership and to express his support for astronomy in particular — for its capacity to promote a greater awareness of our place in the universe, expand human knowledge, and inspire the next generation by showing them the beauty and mysteries of the night sky."

The gathering has been organized by the White House, the Office of Science & Technology Policy, and NASA. But the idea originated with Chicago-area amateur astronomer Audrey Fischer and has been actively promoted for six months by the U.S. IYA2009 team. "We're delighted that President Obama will take a break from his pressing terrestrial concerns to personally witness some of the same celestial spectacles that Galileo first studied 400 years ago and that revolutionized our understanding of the universe and our home planet," says astronomer Stephen M. Pompea of the National Optical Astronomy Observatory (NOAO). Pompea is U.S. IYA2009 Program Director and will attend Wednesday's star party.

President Obama will kick off the event with a brief address that will be streamed live on the White House website and on NASA TV around 8 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. Even if clouds or rain intervene to prevent telescopic viewing, attendees will still have plenty to do. The star-party program features interactive planetarium presentations and hands-on activities such as the construction of scale models of the solar system, simulations of impact cratering, and investigations of meteorites and Moon rocks.

The White House Star Party is just one of many family-friendly astronomy events and activities happening this fall. Among the others are these:

- October 4-10 — World Space Week (www.worldspaceweek.org)
- October 9 — NASA's LCROSS impact on the Moon (lcross.arc.nasa.gov/education.htm, groups.google.com/group/lcross_observation)
- October 13 — *Hubble's Amazing Rescue* premieres on NOVA (www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/hubble)
- October 9-23 — Great World Wide Star Count (www.starcount.org)
- October 19-25 — Fall Astronomy Week, including Fall Astronomy Day on Saturday, October 24, organized by the Astronomical League (www.astroleague.org)
- October 22-24 — IYA2009 Galilean Nights global star party (www.galileannights.org)
- November 10-30 — NASA's Great Observatories image unveiling (hubblesource.stsci.edu/events/iyafinale)

While only a lucky few will be able to join President Obama for telescopic viewing at the White House, many more citizens will get to look through telescopes on October 7th and throughout the fall thanks to the many "sidewalk astronomers" who will take to the streets all across the country. Among them will be Pompea's NAO colleague Robert Sparks; he'll set up telescopes near the White House this week so that visitors without invitations to the star party can still do some astronomical observing supervised by an expert. Among the telescopes Sparks will employ is the Galileoscope, which he, Pompea, and others developed as a Cornerstone Project of the global IYA2009 effort. While not quite a replica of one of Galileo's telescopes, the Galileoscope is similar in design to the ones Galileo used but much improved thanks to its 21st-century optics.

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More information about the International Year of Astronomy 2009 is available at these websites:

- www.astronomy2009.org
- www.astronomy2009.us
- astronomy2009.nasa.gov

More information about the Galileoscope is available at www.galileoscope.org.

