

~~JOHN HEYN, 56, TALKS WITH
HIS UNCLE HERMAN HEYN, 83,
A STREET-CORNER ASTRONOMER.~~

John Heyn: Uncle Herman, what did you think you were going to be when you grew up?

Herman Heyn: Well, I wanted to be a scientist, but I had learning disabilities. I have a bad memory for lists of words; I couldn't remember rules of English grammar, or spelling lists and vocabulary lists. . . . I just wasn't a good learner.

But when I was in the eighth grade, my science teacher, Miss Wicker, drew the Big Dipper on the blackboard one day and said, "Go find it tonight." So I went out and found it that night and thought it was totally beautiful. I got hooked on astronomy from that very moment.

My mother used to say, "You can spell Andromeda, but you can't spell anything they want you to in school. What's wrong here?" [*Laughs.*] But stuff I really wanted to learn for

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myself, I could concentrate real well and learn a whole lot—no learning disabilities there. So at the age of thirteen or fourteen, I started getting books out of the library and did a lot of reading on astronomy.

Eventually, around age fifteen, I leaned on my father to get me a telescope, and I've just been with it ever since. Astronomy—it's just *me*. Some people like trees, some people like birds. For me, it was always stars. It's just a part of my nature—in my genome, so to speak.

John: You inspired the family to become stargazers. Growing up, I don't recall we ever had a telescope, but I remember you giving us maps of the constellations. They were these glow-in-the-dark charts, and we would kind of take them outside and hold them up in the sky and try to match up the constellations.

Herman: Well, you know, I've always had what I call an "education bone," and what you just described is an example of it. I got a degree in elementary education in general science, but I decided I didn't want to teach in a classroom because of my learning disabilities. I couldn't remember kids' names. I couldn't even get organized enough to write them down.

And so I went into various kinds of jobs—lab tech, sales, and so forth and so on—and each time I'd start a new job I'd say, "I'm going to stay with it. I'm going to get benefits and vacation and retirement and raises," but three years later I wouldn't be able to stand it anymore, and I had to get out of

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there and get another job. I had so many jobs, I can't even make a list of them all, but it would be a very long list.

And then, one beautiful night in November 1987, the moon was up, Jupiter was up, and I had nothing on my schedule. And so I decided, *Heck, I'm going to take my telescope out on the street and invite people to look at the stars.* And as I was walking out the door I said, "Oh, I'll take a tip hat with me, too, and see what happens."

I set up the telescope in Fell's Point, and I had people looking at the moon and Jupiter. I think that first night I made ten dollars. Then I went back the next night and made forty dollars, and I moved the hat a little closer. And I said, "Well, if I can make money at this, maybe I can do it full-time."

And that's really how I got started as a street-corner telescopist. I became very serious about it. I went out every possible night, till two or three o'clock in the morning sometimes, and set up the telescope, even in cold weather. Sometimes I'd have to recruit a passerby to take my wrench and unscrew the bolts on the telescope when I wanted to go home, because my fingers were too stiff.

When I set up, I have a sign on the front of the telescope that says, "Tonight Saturn and its rings. HAV-A-LOOK!" That's my trademark: *HAV-A-LOOK!* Then, as people are passing by, I'll say, "Have a look, folks. The moon: an awesome view through my telescope!" or "Have a look, folks. Tonight the rings of Saturn. A chance of a lifetime!"

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John: You've said that when you started, there were people who thought what they were seeing was not real. Can you explain that?

Herman: Well, when you look through a good telescope at the moon or, say, Jupiter or Saturn, it's quite amazing. And probably 99 percent of all the people that look through my telescope had no idea that these things looked that way. Especially with Saturn, people would say, "It's not real!" I used to go through five different ways of trying to prove to them that it is, and finally I gave that up. Now I just say, "If it looks fake, it's in good focus," and people accept that. *[Laughs.]*

I really enjoy sharing my love of the celestial sky with anybody and everybody. I say the best part of my life is being out there with a telescope, and then it's downhill from there. *[Laughs.]* And you know, underneath it all I'm a scientist. All the information I give out about the planets and the moon is scientifically correct. There have been people who have looked through my telescope and taken up astronomy themselves, bought their own telescopes, joined an astronomy club. Somebody even told me they named their boat *Saturn* after looking at it through my telescope. And all of that makes me feel like this is worthwhile.

John: How many years have you been doing street-corner astronomy?

Herman: I just finished my twenty-seventh year. By actual

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count I've been out on the street 2,637 times—I keep a log. Each night when I go home I write down what we looked at, any special things that happened, any friends who visited, and put a number on it.

I'd say my street telescoping is the same today as it was on day one or two—the reactions of the people, the way I respond to people. It's like being in a Broadway show that has a long run. The only thing that's changed is I've gotten older, and I haven't had quite the stamina that I had when I was younger. I used to pick up the telescope and carry it for hundreds of feet, but now I'm lucky if I can carry it ten feet.

Back in 1997 when the Hale-Bopp comet came around, I was in a write-up in the *Baltimore Sun* paper. They asked, "How did you get started in astronomy?" and I talked about Miss Wicker in the eighth grade. At that point I didn't know if Miss Wicker was dead or alive. But she saw the article, called me up, and I actually met with her at her retirement home.

I visited Miss Wicker a couple of times after that, and we became good friends. And when she died, I was one of the eulogizers at her funeral. I said that one of the questions I get most often when I'm on the street is, "How did you get started in astronomy?" And I always say, "Miss Wicker's class." I talked about how often her name is still out there, being circulated in the public.

Over the years, I've been hoping that somebody would

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come along and say, "I got my degree in science" or "I got my PhD in astronomy having first looked through your telescope," but it hasn't happened yet. Maybe there are others out there that I don't know about. I'm still hoping.



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