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Asteroids bear school, educator's monikers Hundreds celebrate at ground breaking

By Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola
Staff Writer

REHOBOTH — Thanks to the discovery of a two asteroids orbiting the sun, the Rehoboth Christian School community is now officially linked to the international astronomy community.

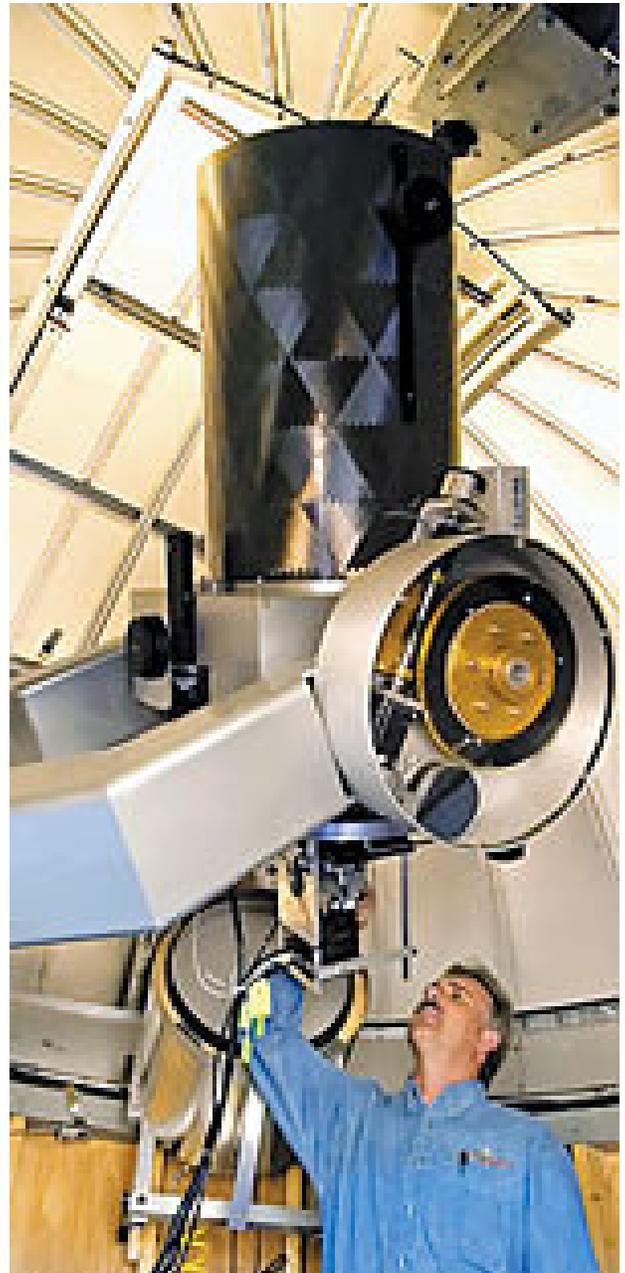
Just a few years ago, those asteroids — rocky objects that are sometimes called “minor planets” or “space junk” depending on terminology — had yet to be discovered.

Then on Oct. 12, 2005, one asteroid was discovered through the use of a remote-controlled telescope located in an observatory south of the Rehoboth campus. It was given the provisional and unexciting scientific name of Asteroid 145475. On Jan. 6, 2006, a second asteroid was discovered through the same Rehoboth telescope and given the provisional name of Asteroid 134244.

Recently, however, the Asteroid 145475 was officially named “Rehoboth” to honor Rehoboth Christian School for providing an observatory site for the remote-controlled telescope, and the second asteroid was officially named “De Young” in honor of Mike De Young, the Rehoboth educator who works as the local liaison for the observatory.

In a recent interview, De Young admitted he was “surprised and honored” to learn that the newly discovered asteroids would bear the name of the school he has worked at for 30 years and his own surname.

“It’s just kind of a neat honor,” said De Young, Rehoboth’s network administrator, who currently oversees the school’s



technology system. A former longtime science teacher, De Young periodically hosts public star parties at the observatory.

Although located on Rehoboth land, the observatory is actually owned and operated by Calvin College in Michigan. Using grant money from the National Science Foundation, Calvin installed a new, computer-controlled telescope in Michigan and built the Rehoboth observatory in 2004 and installed a second computer-controlled telescope here. Under the direction of Professor Larry Molnar and Calvin's Physics and Astronomy Department, science students in Michigan operate the Rehoboth telescope via the Internet.

De Young assisted in the project by helping with the site development, he said, and working with local contractors during the observatory's construction. He continues to help through maintenance of the telescope and observatory.

Molnar and Calvin chose the Rehoboth site, said De Young, because of the local area's clear skies, high elevation, and low light pollution. "This particular facility seems to be ideal for it," he said.

According to De Young, the newly named asteroids are just two of about 120 asteroids that may have been discovered through the use of the Rehoboth remote-controlled telescope. About 23 of the asteroids have confirmed orbital paths, he explained, and the rest are still being investigated.

According to a Calvin news release, a newly discovered asteroid is given a provisional name but must be tracked for a length of time to fully document its orbit. The object is registered with the Minor Planet Center of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics and is assigned a number indicating its order of discovery. Once the asteroid's orbit is fully documented, the discoverer of the asteroid is invited to suggest a name to the International Astronomical Union's Committee on Small Body Nomenclature.

As the discoverer of the two asteroids, Professor Molnar chose the names "Rehoboth" and "De Young." Two previously discovered asteroids were named after a former Calvin College president and professor. Although asteroids can be several hundred miles in

diameter, "Rehoboth" and "De Young" are less than 2 1/2 miles in diameter. "De Young" takes about 4.50 years to orbit the sun.

"The recent discoveries and names are part of a growing Calvin astronomy program that sees Calvin classes making regular new finds in the heavens," the Calvin press release said.

"Classroom observations of asteroids have been a featured use since the commissioning of the new telescopes," said Molnar in the Calvin news release. "Our goal is for students to understand better how real science works by aiming for a new discovery. As far as we know, this is the only astronomy class in the world in which discovery of a new solar system object is a regular assignment."

De Young, who earned his bachelor's degree at Calvin in 1976, agreed. In addition to locating asteroids, he said, the Calvin-Rehoboth Robotic Observatory has been used by Calvin students to monitor variable stars, which are stars that tend to brighten and then dim. Much of this astronomy research, he added, is being done by undergraduate students, whereas at other colleges, such research would be limited to graduate students.

For more information about Calvin College's astronomy discoveries, visit www.calvin.edu/academic/phy/observatory. For more information about the next Rehoboth Star Party, contact Mike De Young at (505) 726-9630.

