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How Much Water Would it Take to Put out the Sun?



May 13, 2009 –

Stephen Ramsden laughs when people start singing the lyrics to Manfred Mann's hit, "Blinded by the Light."

It's especially amusing when they get to the part of the song that goes: "Mama always told me not to look into the eyes of the sun. But mama, that's where the fun is."

"I get those lyrics all the time," he chuckles. "Invariably, someone always quotes that song."

Maybe that's because Ramsden's idea of fun is staring into the sun. His hobby is solar astronomy: a Sun Ambassador, if you will. And when he's not controlling planes at Atlanta Center, which he's been doing for 20 years, chances are good you'll find him wowing kids at school with his tales of blinding light.

Thanks to the FAA's Aviation and Space Outreach program, and support from the National Air Traffic Controllers Association and the National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees, Ramsden is able to use some official time and his regular days off to visit local high schools and youth groups.

He figures he has spoken to nearly 5,000 kids last year alone. He's visited schools, churches, Scout troops, and home-schooling groups. This year, he plans to hit even more.

Ramsden never goes anywhere without his telescopes. He owns seven of them, paid for out of his own pocket. They each cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000. One even goes for \$40,000.

But he doesn't concern himself with the costs. Nor the recognition, even though he won an FAA award last year for his work with minorities. Ramsden is in it for that look on children's faces when they learn something that they didn't know before he showed up.



Ramsden with fellow sun seekers this April at Creekview Elementary School in Georgia.

totally blind people can see something in my telescope."

When it comes to the sun, he really knows his stuff. Since he was a kid, Ramsden has been awed by Earth's closest star and how it's such a central focal point of the world's religions. "It's the giver



Ramsden helps a student at Hopewell Middle School in Georgia get a glimpse of the sun.

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of life," he says.

Ramsden's ambitions are as outsized as the man himself. A self-described "big old teddy bear" at 6 feet 2 inches and 340 pounds, he started a project three years ago to build what will be the first solar observatory solely for students. There's nothing comparable in the nation, or maybe even the world, as far as he knows.

This endeavor is personal on so many levels. Ramsden named the project after a fellow controller, Charlie Bates, who died a few years ago. The back story can be found at www.charliebates.org.

It's clear by now that Ramsden is a guy whose aim is set high. He just wishes more people would look to the heavens.

"Most people are so busy they hardly ever bother to look at nature's gifts. The most amazing, the most beautiful sights ever imagined are always right above you."

So remember, look up more.

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